The Wanderer

Book 11 of the Guardian of the Spirit Series

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Series

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chapter one

The first one to bring the news was Cheena, Tanda's little sister. She'd gone to a neighbor to get hot water late that evening.

"It's terrible! The neih in the Yamahata fields has all been devoured by wild mountain dogs!" Cheena called out to Tanda, then slipped through the door and kicked off her straw sandals. She placed the sandals on the raised ledge near the door.

Tanda was sitting on the ledge. He lined up the straw sandals to make them nice and neat. He was stretching out his hand to adjust Cheena's sandals when he heard water sloshing behind him. Cheena was there, carrying hot water in a basin. Tanda smelled the faintly sweet-smelling water and stifled a sneeze.

Cheena rushed over to Tanda's mother with light footsteps.

"Don't exaggerate," his mother said. "You're speaking like a child. Tell me what happened."

Tanda's youngest brother, Kaiza, had just been born and was breast feeding. Tanda's mother set the baby down hurriedly and frowned severely. "What did you say about wild mountain dogs?" She leaned forward, closer to the room's fire. "It can't have been that. The alarm bells didn't ring." She smiled a little in exasperation, then picked up baby Kaiza again.

"But the neighbors are already out spreading the same news," Cheena said. "it must be true."

The smile on Tanda's mother's face vanished. Her husband was cutting open a kachi fruit on the other side of the fire.

"What did the neighbors say?" Tanda's father asked.

"What I told you," Cheena said. "The Yamahata fields were attacked by wild mountain dogs. A lot of the vegetables must have been eaten. The neih was all devoured."

"Was anyone hurt?" Tanda's father asked in a serious tone.

"I don't know," Cheena said softly. "I forgot to ask."

"What?!" Tanda was horrified. "But that's really important! How could you forget?"

Tanda's older brother, Noshir, shoved him in the shoulder. "Be quiet, you. Do you think the neighbors will come here, too, Cheena?" he asked.

"I told you what they were saying already," Cheena muttered, pulling a face.

Tanda's father sighed and stood up.

"Are you gonna find out what happened?" Noshir asked. "Can I go, too?"

Tanda's father nodded.

Tanda got up to go with them, but when he saw the forbidding expressions on his father and brother's faces, he sat back down.

Tanda's mother passed a paper lantern to his father so that he and Noshir wouldn't lose their way in the darkness. Tanda's father and Noshir put their sandals on and went outside.

Tanda watched them go with an expression of longing. It was amazing how much Noshir resembled their father. It was getting harder and harder to tell them apart, even if they were only a short distance away.

The door closed, sending a blast of cold autumn air through the small house. Tanda heard a rush of evening sounds and insects for a brief moment before the door slammed shut.

"Cheena," Tanda said, "what's neih?"

Cheena looked to Tanda's mother and sister. Neither of them had an answer. "I don't know," she said.

Tanda snorted. "You really didn't ask them anything at all."

The Yamahata fields were near the edge of the village. Ten or so farm families worked them during the year. There were four girls with the Yamahata surname that Tanda's mother knew of, and one of them was named Neih. Cheena didn't know or remember this, and Tanda didn't know who Neih was.

Tanda tidied up the shelf where the family kept straw sandals, then sat down at the irori. "Mom, can I have some kachi fruit, too?

Tanda's mother nodded and passed Tanda his father's cooking knife. The kachi fruit was enclosed by a hard brown shell. The shell was formed of flower petals that grew over the fruit in a whorl, forming a protective layer. Tanda scored the fruit all the way around and removed

the shell in two large, smooth pieces. The fruit inside was a deep red color.

His father's cooking knife was small and easy for adult hands to handle, but Tanda was only eleven years old, so he was still clumsy when using it. He removed the scant remaining pieces of the shell in small sections.

Tanda's other older brother sat down next to him and cast the discarded shell into the irori's fire. The shell crackled in the flames.

Tanda paused in shelling the kachi fruit to look at the fire.

"You all have to go to bed soon," Tanda's mother said. "We have to be up early tomorrow."

It was late autumn, and the rice was ready for harvesting. Every village within a day's walk used everyone who could be spared to scythe down the rice from dawn until dusk. The children's uncle, their father's brother, was already asleep and snoring after a long day in the fields.

The next morning, the children would wake, have breakfast made for them by their mother, then go out and chase away the birds and the deer so they wouldn't eat the rice crops. Days were always very busy in autumn.

Tanda's dad and Noshir didn't come home that night after dinner. Cheena and Tanda's other older brother started to worry.

"Can't we stay up until dad gets home?" Tanda asked.

His mother shook her head. "We don't know when they'll be back. You have to go to sleep now."

Tanda's other older brother poked him in the head and laughed. "You heard mom. Time for the runts to go to bed. You can't be staying up late, or you won't be able to work tomorrow."

Tanda stepped out of his brother's reach and said, "But I'm not tired, and I won't be tired tomorrow, either, if I stay up."

"Liar. You'll be dead on your feet before we even get the nets ready to catch the birds."

Tanda blushed. Small children had to run around the rice fields searching for birds that had concealed themselves in the dense vegetation. Once they'd found one, they had to trap it so that it wouldn't eat the rice.

The work was endless, thankless and repetitive. Tanda hated it. He'd often fallen asleep after catching three or four birds, preferring to wander in dreams over exhausting himself in the fields.

When Tanda dreamed, he saw very strange things. Glowing caterpillars inched across the sky right before his eyes. Sometimes he saw people standing on the edges of the fields, their outlines limned in pale fire.

Tanda used to tell his parents and siblings all about what he'd seen when he was little, but he didn't tell any of them about it anymore. They didn't believe him. They never had. When he'd first told his father, he'd frowned deeply, then sighed. His brothers had told him to stop being an idiot. Tanda hated having his father exasperated with him, so he kept quiet about the things that he saw.

But Tanda always wanted to know what these things were. He wished he could ask someone, anyone. When his curiosity

overwhelmed him, he ceased field work and went into the mountains alone. An old woman named Torogai lived in a hut in the mountains near the village. Torogai was the only person Tanda had ever known who would answer his questions about the things he saw.

I want to go see grandma Torogai.

Tanda had been so busy helping with the harvest that he hadn't seen Torogai at all recently. If he went to see her, Balsa might be there.

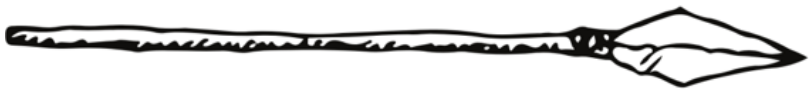
I really want to see Balsa...

Balsa was a girl a few years older than him who lived at Torogai's hut for part of the year. She was always practicing the spear with her foster father, Jiguro. She almost never played with him, but he always wanted to see her.

Balsa was nothing like his siblings or the other village children. She was so violent and angry sometimes that it was hard to believe she was a girl. The village children teased Tanda a lot no matter what he said or did, but he could talk to Balsa about anything.

"Oi! Don't just stand there, Tanda! Lay out your bedding and go to sleep!" his older brother yelled at him.

Tanda stood up hastily, then went into his bedroom.



Tanda didn't want to sleep. He wanted to stay up until his father and Noshir came home, but he was asleep the moment he pulled his shilya

blankets up to his shoulders. He awoke from dreaming when he heard the sound of his father's voice.

There was faint light coming from under the door of Tanda's bedroom. His parents were still awake. They were speaking in hushed whispers, trying not to wake the children, but Tanda could just make out what they were saying.

Tanda sat up a little in his bed and leaned forward.

"...did the wild mountain dog bark? Was that what she heard?" Tanda's mother sounded concerned.

"Yeah. She said the wild dog was surrounded by weird blue light, like a will o' the wisp. The dog…it didn't devour Neih. It killed Onza."

Tanda's eyes widened. His older brother was sleeping next to him and stirred. Tanda held his breath, but his brother didn't wake. He let out a loud snore and turned in his bed with his mouth half-open.

"But is it true?" Tanda's mother asked. "What a terrible thing to happen!"

"Sh," Tanda's father said. "You're too loud. Why would the village messenger lie? He gives us news all the time."

"But, honey...what should we do?"

"If Neih really saw something like that near the Yamahata fields...well, we don't know. Yukaji said he saw the wild mountain dog at sunset, but his eyes could have been playing tricks." Yukaji was the name of the village messenger and herald. "He looked back to be sure. He seemed scared at the time, but now he says he doesn't want to make a fuss....I don't know. Aside from Onza, no one was badly hurt, but the screaming was loud enough to wake the dead."

Tanda's father coughed like he was clearing his throat. "Onza's death is a terrible thing. He was just walking on the mountain path, so really, it could have happened to any of us. He usually stopped at Yoza the carpenter's before returning to the village, but it seems like he forgot this time. And it seems that Neih saw the wild mountain dog right near the carpenter's house."

"What was she doing so far from home?" Tanda's mother asked.

"She was visiting Yasugi Village, downstream from here. She's been seeing a young man there for a while."

"I see… I didn't realize that there were wild mountain dogs around here…"

"Yukaji said he saw it, too," Tanda's father said. "This monster ripped out a man's throat in broad daylight. The village has never even heard of anything so awful as that."

Baby Kaiza made a gurgling sort of sound, then began to cry.

"Ah! There, there. Don't cry. I just fed you, sweetie. Calm down…"

Tanda heard his mother walking across the wooden kitchen floor and caught a glimpse of her through the partially open door.

The full weight of what Tanda had heard hit him in a wave. *Is Onza…dead?*

Tanda usually called Onza his bearded uncle. He was a distant relative of Tanda's mother who was usually away from the village. When he visited, it was always during festivals and holidays. He wore bright clothes with complicated patterns. Onza was always laughing and telling jokes. His long beard was split in two parts and the tips were dyed various colors.

Onza was an excellent musician and could play the pipe very well. He was always in the village for small festivals, walking around and playing his pipe. Many women gathered around him and danced. He drank a lot and sometimes got in trouble for stealing small amounts of money. He had a terrible habit of gossiping maliciously about people.

Tanda's father hated uncle Onza and pulled a cruel face whenever he came to visit, but Tanda had always loved him. He always looked forward to hearing his pipe and started dancing when he heard it in the distance. Uncle Onza had a big belly laugh that showed all his teeth. He smelled sweet and like spices. Tanda enjoyed sitting near him, listening to his pipe and his stories.

Whenever he saw him coming up the path, Tanda would shout a greeting: "Uncle Onza!"

"Oh? Tanda!" Onza's face would crinkle in a smile. He'd rush to Tanda, pick him up and carry him all the way back to the house.

Tanda's father didn't like how close he was to uncle Onza. Tanda could tell. Once, Onza sat on the raised platform next to the door where the shoes were and played his pipe while Tanda's father was making dinner. The music irritated Tanda's father. "If your hands can play that, why don't you go swing a scythe instead!?"

Tanda's father stormed outside to escape the noise. Onza went out to wash up, avoiding Tanda's father.

Tanda was confused by his father's reaction to the music and turned toward his mother, who was drying clothes. "Why is dad so angry?" he asked.

"Your father...is worried about you," his mother said. "He doesn't want you to wind up like uncle Onza."

Tanda's little sister Cheena rushed over and nodded hugely. "Mommy told me that uncle Onza always hated working in the fields since he was real little. He decided to be an artist and go all around the world. He gave us up. He doesn't help us or support us like he should. He comes back when he likes, gets in trouble, and leaves again." Cheena nodded again with the solemnity of a sage. "He spends time playing music and dancing and he never really grew up."

"But that's not the kind of life you want for yourself," Tanda's mother said. "Is it? Would you really be satisfied, leaving everything you know and love behind? Onza was the oldest son in the family, and he left us completely when he was sixteen. He's like the husk of a grain of rice floating in the fields. He'll never realize the full potential of who he was supposed to be."

Tanda's mother picked up the clothes she was drying and started folding them. "You have some things in common with Onza," she said. "But I'd hate to see you grow up as a floating rice husk. You're a third son. That means you'll work hard for your family, make a good marriage in the village, and have your own children one day."

Tanda's mother folded up the dried clothes, then went out of the house to dip a basin in the water near the rice paddies. She needed fresh water for washing clothes. Tanda followed her and watched the white husks of rice in the water with a little frown. They couldn't be eaten, and they couldn't be grown. They were worthless. Worse: they were a lost part of next year's harvest. Each one of those husks had

been around an actual grain of rice that could be eaten or sprouted, but now, they never would.

But Tanda already felt like a floating rice husk. He didn't work as hard as his siblings and no one treated him particularly well. He wasn't valued for himself. He had no friends to speak of. Maybe he just hadn't matured yet, but how was he supposed to mature without nurturing and guidance?

If Tanda really was a floating rice husk, no amount of nurturing would ever make him sprout. Later in life, Tanda would look at the husks floating in the rice paddies near harvest time and experience a feeling of profound sadness.

Tanda's mother had called uncle Onza a floating rice husk. He had died horribly under mysterious circumstances. The last time Tanda had seen Onza, his usual clothes were gone, replaced by rags, and he was wasted and thin. He must have been that way when he came up the mountain path just before he died. It seemed that the girl who had found him thought that he'd been gored by a wild mountain dog.

How could he die like that? Why is he dead?

Tanda wasn't scared of wild mountain dogs. Maybe he should have been, but what he truly felt was pity for his uncle Onza and a sense of deep grief.

Rain pattered on the roof of the house. It was dark and warm and quiet. Tanda fell asleep again.

The next morning, the men of the village went out to the carpenter's house where Neih had seen the wild mountain dog to investigate what had happened. There were prints of a creature that could be a dog or a wolf in the muddy road, but the trail away from the road didn't lead far. The dog had crossed a stream, and the previous night's rain had washed away all other clear traces. The villagers believed that the dog was a male separated from his pack. Maybe it had fallen into a trap and gotten injured. The village had never had a wild mountain dog prowling so close to the village before, so they had no idea what to expect regarding the beast's behavior.

The villagers also didn't have time to do much investigating. Every pair of hands was needed to bring in the rice harvest. Still, Onza's bizarre death filled the villagers with anxiety. There were some who said that Onza's unquiet spirit would haunt them, since they'd said cruel things to him while he was alive.

On their way back to the village, people whispered together about their fears and prayed for a good harvest.

chapter two

Tanda's father and uncle were up before sunrise. They went outside the rice paddies that came right up to Tanda's back door and prepared their tools and supplies for a day of work. The family ate a quick breakfast of mixed grains. Tanda's father frowned all the while. He went out to the well to wash his face before breakfast was over, then came back.

"You kids go and get the smoke sticks ready," Tanda's father snapped when he returned. Smoke sticks were covered in a substance called zeko that was like sticky oil, then wrapped in many layers of bark. Smoke sticks burned and created a lot of smoke for a short time. They could be used to startle birds and insects out of the fields.

Tanda flinched. Even his brothers looked troubled.

"What's the matter?" Noshir asked. "Are there blackbugs in the fields?" Smoke sticks could be used to kill blackbugs, a pestilent insect that especially liked eating rice. Blackbugs were only about as big as a baby's fingernail, but when they appeared in large numbers they could devour an entire year's harvest.

Tanda's father nodded. "They're swarming, though I didn't see a single one yesterday. Your uncle's gone to the neighbors to see how things are doing there."

If Tanda's family didn't eliminate the blackbugs quickly, they'd lose the rest of their harvest. The insects would spread to their neighbors' fields if they weren't contained.

"Tanda, run to the bell tower as fast as you can and tell them to sound the alarm," his father said. "If blackbugs are a problem elsewhere, someone else might be headed there already, but if they aren't, then it's our responsibility to warn everyone."

Tanda nodded in understanding, then rushed off to the bell tower. His parents, clearing away the little that remained of breakfast, called out the code for him to give the bell-ringer.

"Zen, mon, jin." Tanda repeated the code to himself as he ran. It meant that the bell-ringer should ring the bell three times fast, one time slow, and two times in quick succession. That code meant there was a blackbug infestation, since three meant "danger," one meant "insects," and two meant "hurry."

Kanchi, who lived near the Yamahata fields, gave Tanda a cheerful wave as he ran past. "Is it blackbugs, youngun?"

"Yeah!" Tanda shouted. He was getting close to the bell tower now, but the ringer wasn't there. Tanda couldn't possibly climb all the way up there and ring the bell. He wasn't strong enough yet.

"Let me do it," Kanchi called out, running over to Tanda. He climbed all the way to the top of the tower and rang the bell: three times, once, twice.

Tanda put his back to the bell tower and started running home. His older brothers were probably getting the smoke sticks ready. The smoke sticks were very effective at killing blackbugs, but the smoke was

so toxic that some people would almost certainly fall ill, too. The smoke burned the eyes and lungs.

When he was back at his house, Tanda bent over and wheezed, catching his breath. A large tree with white bark grew in the rice field above the ones that Tanda's family worked on. "Ah! The naya tree…"

If you take a handful of that bark off a tree and boil it in water, it makes good medicine. Torogai had told him that once. She'd said that it was good for soothing pain.

Tanda suddenly wanted to try making medicine from the tree bark. *I wonder if it's true…* He climbed up the steep slope of the terraced rice field and approached the tree. He removed his own knife from his belt and cut off a piece of bark about as big around as his palm, very carefully, so that he wouldn't harm the tree.

The naya tree is very sacred and important. You must only take off a little tiny bit at a time, and you must never cut too deep.

Removing a bit of the top layer of bark caused a bit of tree sap to leak. It smelled sweet and fragrant. Tanda looked at the sap in alarm, as if it were blood. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Mr. Tree. I'm sorry." He frowned, feeling that in harming the tree he had also harmed himself.

Tanda cupped the bark of the naya tree in his hands carefully and ran back home. His father and brothers were already gone. There was no one near the well when Tanda drew up water in a bucket.

When Tanda went inside with the bark and water, Cheena was helping his mother pack rice cakes into bamboo leaf wrappings.

"Mom, can I borrow a pot?" Tanda asked.

Tanda's mother looked at him with a curious expression. "What do you need a pot for?"

Tanda showed his mother the naya bark and explained what he wanted to do with it.

His mother nodded cautiously. "If it's something Torogai taught you, you can try it. The zeko smoke is always so awful..."

Tanda grabbed a pot and poured the water he'd drawn into it, then added the naya bark. He was a little excited to be making medicine. Now all he had to do was boil it.

"I'll go to the fields to help dad and the others now," Tanda said.

"Can I come, too?" Cheena asked. "I want to kill all the blackbugs!"

Tanda wasn't sure what he should do. It was true that his family needed all the help they could get to exterminate the blackbugs, but Cheena was still very young, and the smoke had made Tanda sick before.

"Don't bother your brother," Tanda's mother cut in. "You can help by bringing breakfast to all the workers."

Cheena's lower lip trembled. She was about to cry.

Tanda gave her a firm nod, then faced his mother. "Mom, Cheena can come with me. She can help wrap the smoke sticks in bark. If it gets to be too much for either of us, I'll come right home. Okay?"

Tanda's mother sighed, but then she smiled. "All right, all right. You can go. Just be careful not to inhale any of that foul smoke. And take the food that we've prepared already with you."

The rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves were still warm. Tanda put the rice balls in a basket, then reached for Cheena's hand. She took it, and they went out to their family's rice fields together.

Tanda felt like skipping. He was excited and as light as air. He knew the village would be in bad trouble if the blackbugs ate all the rice, but that problem seemed distant in his mind.

Some men were already smoking the blackbugs out. Tanda caught sight of his father and waved. "Dad! We brought breakfast!"

"Put it down along the path between the rice paddies," his father called out, wiping sweat from his forehead. "We'll eat when we take a break."

Tanda's brothers were sitting along the edge of the path. Tanda put the basket of rice balls down. His brothers were poking at hot coals to keep them glowing and wrapping zeko-covered sticks in bark. The oily zeko was stuck to a layer of bark first, then wrapped around a stick, which was further wrapped in bark so that it would burn longer.

Tanda showed Cheena how to wrap the sticks. "See? You hold this here, then twist it like this."

Cheena watched him carefully and nodded. Her first attempts were clumsy, but she was soon wrapping sticks at a rate comparable to Tanda's.

"Stay by me when we start passing the sticks out," Tanda said. "And don't breathe in any of the smoke. It'll hurt your eyes and your throat really, really bad. You'll need to wrap a clean rag around your nose and mouth before the sticks are lit."

Cheena nodded. "Okay!"

Tanda let Cheena keep wrapping the sticks, then went out to the fields. He wanted to check that they were draining properly into the irrigation ditches. It wasn't very important for the harvest, but if the fields weren't draining properly when new seedlings sprouted, the men working in the fields could sink down in mud up to their knees.

The rice stalks drooped as he passed them by. All of them were covered in blackbugs. Tanda and his family had worked so hard to grow this rice and had taken such good care of it...for all of it to disappear into the stomachs of these pests felt profoundly unfair to him. He hated the blackbugs for ruining everything.

Then Tanda started nearing the smoke, and the blackbugs on the rice plants lessened. They lost their grip on the plants and fell off, rolling onto the ground before lying still.

Tanda accepted a lit smoke stick from his father, then started dashing around saving rice plants. He was so consumed in his task that he forgot to eat. The sun was high in the sky before he realized how badly his throat and eyes hurt.

"Hey! Tanda, stop! You haven't eaten yet!"

The voice of Tanda's father snapped him out of what he was doing. He took a deep breath, then coughed from the thick smoke.

Cheena had followed after Tanda and helped him as quietly as a shadow, but the moment she heard their father's voice, she broke down and burst into tears.

"Don't cry," their father said. "Do your eyes hurt?" He patted Cheena on the head.

Cheena bit her lower lip and stopped crying. She shook her head. "I'm okay," she said quietly.

Tanda's uncle and brothers had come along with his father to get them. Their father passed a jar of water to Cheena.

"You did well being out in the smoke for so long, Cheena," their uncle said, patting her affectionately on the head.

Cheena glowed with the praise.

By some trick or miracle, their uncle's eyes and throat didn't seem to be affected by the smoke at all. Tanda's older brothers rubbed their eyes vigorously and gulped down water.

Tanda's eyes and throat hurt so bad that he wanted to cry, but he didn't. He drank his share of water, then stuffed his cheeks full of rice balls.

Everyone sat down at the edge of the rice field to eat. Tanda gazed out at the fields. Countless blackbugs had fallen into the mud and were now still. He had delighted in killing them, but seeing them now with their little legs to the sky made him feel a twinge of regretful sadness.

Two years ago, there had been another blackbug infestation as bad as this one. Tanda remembered asking Torogai, "Is there any way to kill all the blackbugs and make it so that they never, ever come back?"

Torogai had laughed. "Even if there was a way, no magic weaver would ever do it."

"Huh? Why?" Tanda had asked.

"Because many birds eat blackbugs, and exterminating them would cause those birds to starve," Torogai had said.

"But the birds can eat other bugs…and isn't the rice more important than the birds, anyway?"

Torogai's eyebrows had shot up in surprise. She'd smiled a somewhat unsettling smile. "It's your people's job to grow and watch over the rice plants. Magic weavers are always hard at work watching over and protecting something else."

But no matter how often Tanda had asked, Torogai wasn't able to explain exactly what it was that she was protecting.

As Tanda thought about these things, his father stood up, brushing crumbs and grains of cooked rice from his lap. "It's time to get back to work."

Tanda and his family worked on exterminating the blackbugs until dusk. By the time they all went home, they were all deeply sunburned and urgently thirsty.

Tanda went out to get a drink and wash his face by the well. He washed his hands thoroughly like his mother had told him to. Then he went inside and retrieved the pot he'd placed his naya bark in earlier in the day.

He set his finger tentatively in the naya-infused water and was astonished when the sunburn on that finger went away.

He flexed his finger. It didn't hurt.

Tanda pulled out a clean rag and dipped it in the medicine water. He wrung the rag out, then dabbed it around his eyes.

"Ow ow ow ow..."

The medicine stung, but after a few seconds, the pain in his eyes began to ease.

Grandma Torogai was right. It really does work!

Tanda went over to Cheena first and used the rag to apply the medicine water all around her eyes. At first, Cheena flinched and tried to push him away, but then she realized that her eyes really did feel better.

"What is that stuff?" Cheena asked.

Tanda's older brother heard them talking and came over to him and Cheena. When Tanda explained what the medicine water was, he said, "Fix my eyes, too."

Tanda handed the rag over to him. He dipped it in the water, wrung it out, and dabbed the naya bark medicine all over his own eyes.

In short order, Noshir, Tanda's father and his uncle all lined up to make use of Tanda's medicine water. Tanda's father gave him some unexpected words of praise.

"Huh...this stuff really works."

Tanda had rarely been so happy in his life.

Tanda's father looked at him with a solemn expression. "Bring this medicine to the neighbors, too," he said gruffly. "You know how much smoke Nī inhaled today, and he doesn't take it well."

Tanda nodded in understanding. "I'll take it over there right now!"

Tanda picked up the bowl of medicine and was about to leave when his older brother called him back.

"Wait a minute!" Noshir called after Tanda. "I'll take it instead. You're so clumsy that you might drop it before we get to the neighbors' house. You should get more naya bark and make more of this stuff."

Tanda hesitated. Noshir gave him a bitter kind of smile.

"Don't worry, I'll go with you and give you credit. It's quite an achievement. People should know that you did it."

Tanda blushed faintly pink, but he nodded.

Noshir left the house with the medicine water. Tanda went to the kitchen to get another pot so that he could make more medicine. His mother handed him one of their pots and said, "Use this one. It's old and I don't use it for much anymore."

Noshir laughed at their mother. "Do you really care what the pot looks like so much, mom?"

Tanda was barely paying attention to him. He was in an unusually good mood. He picked up the old pot and said, "I'll go get more naya bark, so wait for me!"

Noshir nodded absently. The oldest son of the neighbors' family, Nī, was his same age and a close friend. Tanda could easily imagine that he wanted to rush over there as soon as possible, so he harvested more naya bark—more carefully this time—and ran back. Then he and Noshir went to visit Nī's family together.

Noshir called out a greeting outside Nī's house. A middle-aged man called out a friendly greeting. When Tanda and Noshir entered, the family were all seated on the earth floor, deep in conversation.

"Isn't it odd, though? We didn't see a single blackbug for the whole season until yesterday, and now they're swarming? What happened? Were we cursed or something? The Kawahatas seem to think so..."

Noshir's friend Nī, the oldest son of the family, spat at the mention of the Kawahatas.

Tanda's shoulders stiffened when he heard the word "curse." Was his uncle's restless spirit being blamed for the blackbugs, since he'd died right before they'd appeared?

Tanda was about to say something, but Noshir made a cutting gesture with his hand.

Nī looked up at Tanda and smiled in recognition. "Oh! Tanda, Noshir. When did you get here?"

Tanda and Noshir showed Nī and his family how to use the naya bark medicine.

"Wow! That medicine really works!"

The family's eyes were still red even after being treated, but they said that they felt a whole lot better.

Nī shook his head a little. "The zeko smoke affects me really bad. My eyes are always red for at least a day afterwards. At least it doesn't

hurt as bad anymore." He wasn't as tall as Noshir, but his shoulders were broader. He looked like a full-grown adult to Tanda.

Tanda took back the medicine bowl, then asked Nī what his family had been talking about when they'd walked in.

"Oh, that stuff about blackbugs and a curse? Yeah, some people are saying that. You know that magic weaver lady who lives in the mountains pretty well, right? Was she the one who taught you how to make this medicine? You should go talk to her. She might know more about the curse, and how to break it."

"Don't encourage him," Noshir said darkly. "He'll take any excuse to get out of working in the fields."

Nī's father came over to his son and sat down, sipping tea. He rested a hand on his son's shoulder and said, "Noshir's right. You shouldn't speak too lightly about going to see that magic weaver."

Noshir stood up and waited for Tanda to do the same. "That's all we came by for," he said. Noshir said goodbye to Nī. The family thanked them profusely for bringing over the medicine.

When Tanda and Noshir went outside, it was already sunset. The sky was a thick sheet of clouds lit red-purple by the sun.

"Noshir," Tanda said as they walked. "I want to take some medicine to our grandma in Tōhata."

Their mother's mother was a full Yakoo and lived on the other side of the river. If Tanda started running now, he should be able to make it to her house before it was dark.

"Right now?" Noshir said with a little frown. "It's dinnertime."

"I'll go alone," Tanda said. "I'm sure grandma will feed me. I'll stay there tonight."

Noshir shrugged. He could easily understand why Tanda wanted to bring their grandmother the medicine. "I always say you'll do anything to get out of working in the fields...but anyway, bringing some to grandma is a good idea. Go ahead, but be careful crossing the river. The bridge needs repair, and it was never in very good shape to begin with."

Tanda nodded, clutched the medicine water closely to him so that he wouldn't spill, then started running.

The shadows of birds crossing the sunset sky looked to Tanda like streaks of black in a woven tapestry. The birds called out to one another as they returned to their nests in the forest for the night.

Tanda wanted to visit his grandmother, but she wasn't the only person he wanted to visit. He couldn't go into the mountains to see Torogai without a lantern, so he decided to give his grandmother the medicine water and ask her about his uncle Onza. He'd been born in the village of Tōhata. Tanda wanted to know if his grandmother thought uncle Onza's spirit had cursed them or not.

chapter three

Tanda reached Tōhata village just when it was growing dark. The huts were all dome-shaped and formed of mud baked to clay by the sun. Most of the people living in the village were fully Yakoo, like Tanda's grandmother.

Tanda's maternal grandfather had passed away two years ago. He'd been part Yogoese and had looked more Yogoese than Yakoo, based on his lighter skin color. Tanda's grandmother had the slight build and browner skin that was typical of the Yakoo.

Tanda's grandmother had once lived in the villages of Yashiro and Toumi in her youth, but she'd settled on Tōhata as the best place to raise a family. When she'd resettled to Tōhata, she'd said that she never wanted to move again for the rest of her life.

Smoke rose from the small holes in the roofs of the huts as Tanda drew near. It was dinnertime, and various savory smells reached Tanda's nose.

Tanda stopped outside his grandmother's door and called out a polite greeting: "Good evening!"

"Who is it?" Tanda's grandmother called back. Her tone was light and friendly, not irritated.

Tanda stepped into the house and noticed his grandmother stretched out in front of the hearth fire. When his grandmother saw him, she smiled.

"Oh, it's you, Tanda! I was sure I'd be spending a quiet evening without any children. You're very welcome to stay for dinner. Come in, come in."

She paused, then said, "I heard about what's happening in your family's fields. How awful. When I was a girl, our field was small, so my father would take care of the blackbugs himself and send us children to help the neighbors."

Tanda's grandmother had an older brother who'd married into a Yakoo family. His son had married another Yakoo, and later, the son and his wife came to live with Tanda's grandmother. Tanda's grandmother and her nephew's wife had gotten along well from the first and were good friends. Tanda felt more at ease in this place than he did at his own house.

Tanda's grandmother often had visitors, but tonight, there was only Tanda, his uncle, and his aunt. They all prepared the evening meal together. Tanda's uncle set a fire in the irori, then sat down.

The house had a distinctive and somewhat peculiar smell. Tanda's uncle was a hunter and often cured meat, so it was the family's habit to burn sweet-smelling bark and herbs to freshen the air.

Tanda's uncle threw some dried bark into the irori's fire. The pleasant-smelling smoke drifted up from the fire and exited the hut via a small hole in the roof.

Since most of the people in Tōhata were Yakoo, they lived their lives in a traditional Yakoo manner. They didn't maintain large rice fields, instead making their living by hunting and gathering food to trade for other goods. Everyone in the village shared what was brought in by the hunters and gatherers so that no one would starve.

The most common game to hunt was deer, followed closely by wild boar. The villagers dried the meat and sold it to the surrounding villages for rice and other staples. Since deer and boar ate crops and wreaked havoc in the fields, the people in the nearby villages were grateful to Tōhata's hunters.

Tanda told his uncle about the medicine water.

His uncle nodded gratefully. "Thank you for saving some for us," he said. "We haven't had to use smoke sticks here, but this will still be good to have. That smoke stings the eyes something fierce."

Tanda's uncle poured the medicine water into a new kitchen pot. "Thank your mother for sending it in the pot, too. You can go back to her with it tomorrow."

"Naya bark medicine, huh?" Tanda's grandmother asked with a little sigh. "That takes me back."

"Huh?" Tanda asked. "Grandma, do you know about this medicine?"

"I used to make it for my uncle," Tanda's grandmother said. "His eyes bothered him whenever he smoked meat. I've forgotten the right way to harvest the bark."

Torogai's uncle nodded in sad understanding. "Most hunters don't smoke meat the same way we used to."

Tanda's grandmother cupped his cheek in her wrinkled hand. "Thank you for reminding me of the past," she said. "Who taught you how to make this medicine?"

Tanda's grandmother was somewhat deaf. Tanda leaned in and told her what Torogai had said about how to make the medicine.

"Oh, Torogai. She is very wise and knows much. You should learn all you can from her so that you can grow up to be a wise man."

"I will!" Tanda nodded happily. He wanted to learn everything that Torogai knew.

Tanda's uncle put his hands on his thighs for support and stood up. "I'll give you some boar meat as thanks for the medicine. It's been curing for quite a while and should be ready to eat. If you're hungry, we can eat some now."

Tanda's aunt smiled. "That would be nice," she said. "I made okina soup to help soothe our throats after all that smoke today. If I add a bit of meat to it, it'll be a feast."

Tanda's uncle cut down some strips of dried boar meat. Tanda rinsed out his mother's pot while waiting for the meat to cook. He helped with making the meal as much as he could. As a third son who hated field work, he'd spent a lot of time with his mother in the kitchen and knew the proper way to chop vegetables and mix ingredients. Tanda had a knack for cooking. If his mother showed him how to do something once, he usually remembered it.

Tanda tasted the okina soup and pulled a face. The broth was so bitter.

Tanda's grandmother laughed. "You're even more sensitive than our Tona," she said.

The broth was bitter, but the meat was very soft after being soaked and boiled. It was salty and spicy and very delicious. Tanda hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, so he devoured his dinner and paid no attention to anything else for awhile.

In addition to the soup, Tanda's aunt put out a dish of mixed rice that was roasted, then spiced with many herbs. Tanda asked for two helpings. Eating while surrounded by the swirling, sweet-smelling smoke from the irori was nice and comfortable.

When he was almost done eating, Tanda remembered that he'd come here to ask his grandmother about his uncle Onza. He chewed a piece of meat, then swallowed. "Um, today…" he trailed off, searching for words. In fits and starts, he told his grandmother what Nī's family had said about a curse that afternoon.

Tanda's grandmother shook her head. "Do you really think that my little dancing Onza would curse a village with you in it, Tanda?" she asked. "He was a good-hearted person who always wanted to make people smile. He might try to keep singing after death, but he wasn't the kind of man who would curse people."

"You're right," Tanda said.

Tanda's uncle ladled more soup into a bowl. "Taroka must be feeling pretty rotten about now. There was bad blood between him and Onza, even though they were brothers. He buried him outside of town, at the very edge of the village, even though Onza was no criminal. It's sad."

Tanda's uncle shrugged. "I can kind of understand how Taroka feels. Onza was the oldest son, and all of his responsibilities fell on Taroka when he left."

Tanda startled in surprise. "Does uncle Taroka hate uncle Onza? Why?"

Tanda's uncle sighed. "It's a long story. Their parents died young in an epidemic that swept through the village. Onza sold off his inheritance and went to the capital. His share of the inheritance was half of the family's rice fields.

"That put Taroka in a bad spot. He had to support the whole family on half the land they'd owned before, and they had several younger siblings. Neih and Ori, the oldest siblings after Taroka, married out of the family soon after. Taroka had to raise the younger ones all alone."

Tanda's grandmother put a tea service on the table near the irori. "Taroka's a fool," she said. "Onza loved Ori more than anyone. We used to tease him about it all the time. All the kids got along pretty well, before..."

"Isn't Ori about as old as mom?" Tanda asked.

Tanda's grandmother nodded.

"She's a year or two older than me," Tanda's uncle said. "He went downstream to Yasugi and met a man there that she wanted to marry. Onza came to see them married. I never saw him so happy. He bought Ori a sash embroidered with gold thread to add to her wedding attire. I can see it now, shining in the sun."

Tanda's grandmother laughed, but it was a lonely sound. "It's a shame she never wore it. Onza was so happy when he presented it to

her. He was always happy. He gave his earnings from the capital to the villagers that day, so everyone was in high spirits. He came here a lot, though he never went to see his older sister, not once. Whenever I talked to Ori about it, she looked troubled."

"Ori will be angry about Onza's indecent burial," Tanda's uncle said.

Tanda's grandmother nodded in agreement. "I like to think that Onza was going to visit Ori," she said. "It would probably soothe his spirit if Ori visited his grave. But Ori hurt her hip pretty badly awhile back. She hasn't been able to leave Yasugi village in a while."

Tanda's grandmother took a sip of tea, then smiled sadly. "I think Onza was going to visit Ori when he was attacked by that wild dog. It was very like him to wander along the road."

Tanda's uncle nodded. "He liked to wander, play his pipe, and dance. And now he's gone...dead along the side of the road. It doesn't seem real." He looked at Tanda. "But I think your grandma is right. Onza wasn't the sort of man to curse anyone."

The next morning, Tanda's uncle went out early to check his traps. Tanda felt quietly satisfied as he got on the road leading home. He'd accomplished what he set out to do. He was glad that uncle Onza's spirit wasn't hurting anyone.

Everyone was probably out in the fields already. When he got home, the house was dark and empty. Tanda got a drink from a water

jar, then went outside to look for his family.

A gentle breeze blew across the fields, full of rice ready to harvest. Sunlight burnished the rice plants to a golden shine. Tanda saw people moving in the fields from afar: his father, uncle, and Noshir. They hadn't seen him yet.

Tanda rubbed his eyes, then looked around for his sister Cheena and his other brother, but they were nowhere to be found. That probably meant that they were out scaring birds to chase them away from the fields.

But why? Tanda frowned. Birds hated zeko smoke, too. There shouldn't be any birds at all in the fields today. His siblings didn't need his help to chase off birds if there were no birds to chase.

I can go to Torogai's hut today.

His brother and sister were probably with his mother in the fields somewhere, but no one really needed him to be here today. They'd probably assume that he'd stayed in Tōhata to help his grandmother. No one would question his story.

Tanda sneaked back to the house, careful not to let anyone see him. Then he started running up the path to Torogai's hut.

chapter four

It was a beautiful day. Although it was the end of autumn, the weather was as warm as a day in late summer. The clear, warm sunlight shone through the leaves overhead as Tanda sprinted to Torogai's hut.

The path was steep, but familiar. Tanda made good time.

I wonder if Balsa's here.

Balsa and Jiguro were habitual wanderers, so they weren't always at Torogai's house. Balsa's foster father, Jiguro, might have taken her somewhere on a bodyguarding job.

Tanda had last visited Torogai three weeks before. Balsa and Jiguro had been at the hut then. Tanda hoped that they were still there.

The roof of Torogai's hut came into view. Tanda heard a violent thwacking sound and stopped to listen. It sounded like bags of rice or straw being thrown back and forth in rapid succession.

Tanda stopped running in the grassy area just outside the hut. He blinked in surprise when he saw Balsa engaged in combat with a heavy flaxen bag stuffed with something harder and heavier than rice.

Balsa had a slight build, so watching her take hits from the large bag and strike it in turn made Tanda stop dead in his tracks. He winced on Balsa's behalf.

After a while, Balsa stepped back from the bag, wiping sweat from her forehead. She faced Tanda and said, "If you're looking for Torogai, she isn't here today."

Tanda blinked in surprise at Balsa's rough tone. "Where is she?"

"The Lower Fan in Kosenkyo."

"What? Why?"

Balsa shrugged. "Dunno. She said some kid was possessed by a monster or spirit or something."

Balsa took a deep breath, then rushed past Tanda toward the well. She loosened her collar a little, then drew up water in a bucket. She transferred the water to a basin, then pulled down a clean rag from where it hung on a makeshift clothesline. She dipped the rag in water and started cleaning herself up.

"...Balsa."

Balsa pivoted, facing Tanda again. "Yeah?"

"Are you mad about something?"

Balsa's eyes went wide. She appeared briefly troubled, then turned away. She looked up at Tanda, still hanging her head a little. "I'm not mad at you or anything," she said. "I haven't talked to anyone in more than a week. My voice sounds funny when it comes out."

"You're been alone here for that long?" Tanda was astonished. "What about Jiguro? Where is he?"

"He went to the Lower Fan, too," Tanda said.

"For work?"

"He went to another bodyguard to borrow some money," Balsa said. "His name's Jijī, I think."

"And you didn't want to go with?"

Balsa looked at her feet. She wrung out the rag over the basin, then started wiping down her sides and stomach under her clothes. Her movements were rough, almost violent.

"It would be weird for a bodyguard to bring a girl with him," Balsa muttered. "It's not good for us to be seen together too often when we're this close to the border. Rumors get around."

Balsa shrugged like she didn't care, but she was frowning. Her face was red and blotchy from where the bag had collided with her during training.

"Your middle finger's bleeding," Tanda said.

Balsa licked the blood off her finger.

Tanda approached the straw bag and pushed it. It was so heavy that it barely even moved. He couldn't get it to budge so much as an inch unless he used both hands.

The bag started swinging back and forth like a pendulum. Tanda tried to stop it with his weight like Balsa had and felt himself tripping backwards.

Balsa caught Tanda before he fell. He looked up at her, slightly dazed.

"Idiot," she said. "You'll hurt yourself."

Balsa helped Tanda stand on his own two feet again. He was dizzy. He coughed, doubling over. Balsa rubbed Tanda's back until the

coughing fit passed.

"Did it hit your head?" Balsa asked.

"I…don't know." Tanda didn't *think* that the straw bag had hit him in the head, but he was still a little confused.

Balsa helped Tanda sit down in a grassy area just outside the hut. "You and me aren't very big yet, so if someone big hits us, it's a shock. Try to remember how that felt so that you dodge next time."

Tanda's head felt like it was spinning. He nodded, which made the spinning worse.

"I was the same as you, at first," Balsa said. "But I've been practicing every day, getting stronger, and it does get easier."

Tanda's eyes narrowed as he looked up at Balsa. "You've been fighting against that bag every day? For how long?"

Balsa bit her lip. "It's part of spear training. There are times when I'm gonna be weaponless or disarmed, so I need to be prepared for that."

Tanda wanted to ask if Balsa had been lonely, being here on her own and training for all this time, but he didn't. If he asked, Balsa wouldn't answer. She would probably laugh brusquely and shrug the question aside.

But Tanda understood without asking that being left alone for so many days made Balsa restless, bored...and yes, lonely, even if she wouldn't admit it. There wasn't much to do here in this hut in the mountains.

"Hey," Tanda said, getting slowly to his feet. He brushed dirt from his clothes, then said, "Do you want to play?"

Balsa frowned. "Play what?"

"Anything," Tanda said. "Anything you want to do. I can play today, so I think we should do whatever we want."

"I don't really want to play," Balsa said. "I don't have time. I'm almost out of dried meat and perishable food, so I was thinking I'd set some traps today." Balsa rubbed the wet cloth against her neck, which was still sweating.

Tanda watched Balsa wring out the rag again and considered the food situation, then said brightly, "I know! We can go fishing!"

Balsa considered for a long moment, then nodded cautiously. "All right, let's fish. I haven't eaten seafood in...I don't remember how long."

Tanda raised his fist in the air and smiled. "Finally! We can go tabo fishing!"

"Tabo fishing?" Balsa looked confused.

"You've never gone tabo fishing before?" Tanda asked.

Balsa shook her head.

"Okay, I can teach you. It's fun. I need to get a few things ready, but then we can head down to the river."

Tabo were insects that lived in soft soil. Fish loved eating them, so they were excellent bait. He went to the entryway of Torogai's hut and wiped dirt off his legs with the cleaning rags that were stored in a bucket by the door. Once he was cleaned up, Tanda went inside and looked for the kind of thick twine that Torogai and his mother used for

mending clothes. He'd visited Torogai so often that he remembered exactly where it was.

Tanda picked up a long length of twine, folded it in half and cut it in two. Then he rolled the twine into a little round ball and slipped it in his pocket.

Tanda left Torogai's hut and went to the nearby shed to fetch two fishing rods. "Balsa!" he called out. "Come here! I'll teach you how to fish!"

Balsa rested a fishing spear against the wall of the shed. "I don't need a fishing rod," she said.

Tanda nodded, then passed her a length of twine and showed her how to wrap it. "You don't actually need a fishing rod to catch fish, as long as you have tabo."

"What are tabo?" Balsa asked.

"Small insects," Tanda said. "They make holes in the mud...do you see?"

Tanda pointed to some tiny, but distinct, holes in the mud near the shed. Balsa nodded when she noticed them. "Ah, okay. So tabo make those holes."

"It's a nest," Tanda said. "They stay hidden, wait for larger insects to pass by and jump on them to eat them. Watch."

Tanda took his length of twine and unrolled it near the small holes on the ground. After a moment, a small black insect emerged from the hole and started nibbling on the twine. Tanda lifted the twine quickly, hoping the tabo would stay on it, but it dropped from the twine and vanished back into the nest.

Tanda sighed in disappointment. Balsa crouched down next to him. "Pass the twine to me," Balsa said. "I wanna try."

After Tanda passed Balsa the thread, she rolled it in a ball again, then started unrolling it little by little over the tabo nest. Tanda thought she was holding the thread too far away from the nest for the insects to be tempted to emerge, but he was proved wrong when several tabo darted from their nest at the same time. Balsa waited for the tabo to be firmly attached to the twine, then lifted it swiftly, as Tanda had done. The tabo stayed attached, but Balsa directed the twine at Tanda's nose.

"Gah!" Tanda took a step back, feeling one of the tabo crawling over his face.

Balsa laughed. "There's a whole bunch of dead ones in a jar in the shed," she said. "So we don't need any more. Anyway I've caught ‘em before, just didn't know what they were called."

"We can't take them from the jar," Tanda said. "Anyway, it's my turn to catch some tabo."

"Are you sure?" Balsa asked. "You seem kinda scared of them. I think they can sense it, and that's why they were so shy with you. Maybe you reminded them of themselves, shy and always hiding."

Tanda crouched down near the tabo nest with an expression of deep concentration. He didn't want to believe that what Balsa had said was true, so he tried catching them over and over again. Each time, the tabo he'd managed to lure out jumped off his twine and fled back into their nest.

When Tanda looked up after another failed attempt, Balsa was gone. She returned shortly with a jar from the shed that was probably

full of dead tabo.

Tanda frowned sourly, remembering what Balsa had said. He was determined to catch some tabo this time. He imitated Balsa's movements, unrolling the ball of twine slowly a little distance away from the tabo nest.

And then...

"Got ‘em!" Tanda lifted the twine, and the tabo came up along with it. He counted seven or eight of them. He took the jar from Balsa and slipped the bugs inside.

Balsa and Tanda gathered up the rest of their fishing gear and went down to the ravine together. As they passed under the shade of bamboo trees, thick clouds of mosquitoes swarmed around them. Tanda pulled up fistfuls of tanto grass and passed them to Balsa. The smell of the grass repelled mosquitoes. They rubbed it on their arms and faces.

After descending a narrow mountain path for a while, Tanda heard the sussuration of insects and the rushing sound of water. The river was close.

Bright sunlight shone off the smooth white stones lining the riverbank. The breeze blowing over the river's surface was cool and crisp.

"You can use a fishing rod if you want," Balsa said. "I wanna use a spear."

Balsa gripped her fishing spear and splashed it into the water, over and over again. Its sharp point struck the white stones lining the bottom with a strident clang.

Something about Balsa seemed different than it had a second ago. She gazed at the water's surface with an expression of deep concentration. When her first few passes with the spear turned up nothing, she stood completely still and simply watched, every muscle tense.

Tanda observed Balsa for a few moments, watching her movements and feeling her tension like it was his own. Then he laughed.

Balsa looked up at him and frowned. "What?" she asked.

"You're like a bear when you fish," he said. "I've seen it. Have you ever looked at a bear poised over the water, waiting to smack their paw in and take out a fish?"

The look Balsa gave him was one of exasperation. "Don't distract me with something so ridiculous when I'm trying to fish."

Balsa walked a little away from Tanda so that her calves were submerged in the water. This river was deep, but the current was fairly slow. Balsa saw white froth on the rocks further downstream. Tanda got down on his stomach near the shore and looked down at where the fish swam in their hidden homes. His favorite fish swam in this river, and he was determined to catch some.

Tanda took some tabo from the jar he'd brought, placed a few on a slightly protruding rock in the river, and waited. Once he got used to the movement of the water, he could see what was under the surface much better. Bubbles formed at the base of reeds and popped as the river's current passed through them. Every once in a while, Tanda saw dark shadows darting in and out of the reeds. Some shadows that he saw

were completely still. Tanda wondered if those fish were sleeping, or if they had somehow mastered the art of remaining in place despite the water pushing them around.

Buyo were a kind of flying fish that emerged from the water to eat insects. One of them surfaced near Tanda, causing all the other nearby fish to flee with their eyes wide open and their mouths agape.

Tanda sighed a little in disappointment. *So they can see me, like I can see them? What do I look like to them?* He tried putting his finger in the water and watched all the fish dart away again.

The fish must think he was a bird or something, come to pluck them out of their homes. What else were they supposed to think, with his shadow passing over their heads like that? No wonder they were afraid.

Tanda frowned a little, imagining the thoughts of the fish. Even if his imagination was correct, fish like buyo did come above the water to eat bugs. How could the fish tell the difference between bugs and a bird? Was it simply the difference in size?

My hand is big, so they're scared of it. Any sudden movements will scare them away, too.

After considering the situation for a short while, Tanda decided to try something. Slowly, very slowly, he put his hand in the water, then his entire arm. Fish fled away from him, but he expected it. It was an unbearably hot day, but it was the end of autumn and the river water was seasonably cold. The hand that Tanda had dropped underwater soon went numb from the chill.

Tanda kept his arm completely still. Some fish approached it, but when it didn't move, they left it alone. Tanda was tempted to chuckle to himself, but he refrained.

There was a sudden slap to his head from behind. Startled, Tanda pulled his arm from the water, then rolled over on his back on the rock he was stretched out on.

Balsa crouched above him. Tanda hadn't even heard her approach. "You can't do it that way from the rocks," Balsa said. "You've gotta get all the way in the river for that to work."

Tanda simply stared. He was still stunned by the hit and the shock of his arm leaving the cold water.

Balsa sighed. "If you really wanna do it, I'll show you. Watch." Balsa started wading into the river.

Tanda flipped over and called out, "Balsa! Don't!"

Balsa looked back at him with a puzzled expression. "You were trying to catch fish with your hands, right? I can show you. And you shouldn't shout. The fish are already hiding." She started explaining how fish reacted to seeing sunlight, not shadows, but it was clear that Tanda wasn't really listening. She put her hands on her hips and laughed.

Tanda shrank back a little, confused, but Balsa walked backwards in the water, crouched down and grabbed him. "You can see how the fish react if you do this!" Then she threw him in the river. She was right behind him, jumping in with a terrific splash.

The water was cold, but Balsa was still laughing. Tanda turned to face her and laughed, too. He'd swallowed some water and his ears felt

a little funny, but it really was a beautiful day. The trees overhead were red-gold with fall leaves, and above them, the clear blue autumn sky stretched out as far as Tanda could see.

Tanda coughed up a little water, then started swimming. He could just touch the bottom of the river with his feet. He headed for shore, soaked all over, and kicked off his clothes. The he made a graceful dive from the rocks and joined Balsa in the river again.

chapter five

Balsa and Tanda returned to Torogai's hut around sunset. They were almost back when Balsa stopped dead in her tracks. Tanda stopped, too. There was something commanding and forbidding in her posture. She didn't have to tell him to stop moving in words.

Tanda heard voices. He squinted at Torogai's hut in the distance and made out the shadows of people gathered outside, talking to one another while standing in a patch of tall grass.

Tanda gasped when he recognized the voices of his father and his uncle. There were several other men standing outside the hut, all men who worked the fields in Tanda's village.

"We can't stay here," Balsa whispered in Tanda's ear.

He nodded.

Balsa gripped her fishing spear in her right hand their net full of caught fish in her left, then slipped into the trees like a wraith. Tanda could barely tell she was there, and he'd watched her do it. He crouched down along the side of the road and waited.

Balsa was moving closer to the hut; she was just hidden. After a while, Balsa was able to make out a little of what Tanda's father and

uncle were saying. She couldn't really tell what they were talking about, but they seemed angry: they were shouting and waving their arms.

Balsa spent a long while in the trees before Tanda's father, uncle, and the field workers who'd come with them went home. She gestured to Tanda, who ran up to her.

"My dad seems mad about something," Tanda said. "Was he mad at me?"

Balsa shook her head. "I think they came here looking for Torogai. That's what I heard, anyway. They were upset that she wasn't here."

Tanda was surprised—and a little uneasy. Why would his father seek out Torogai? "Did you hear why they wanted to see Torogai?" Tanda asked.

"Something about lifting a curse on the village before the harvest was over...I didn't catch many of the details. I think they left a message for her to meet them at the village messenger's house when she gets back."

Tanda frowned. *So this is about Uncle Onza again...*

Rice harvesting was the most important time of year for the village. The blackbugs were a scourge, and it seemed that the rumor they'd been caused by a curse had spread.

"We should eat," Balsa said. "Then I'll see you home. You've probably missed dinner already."

Tanda shook his head. "It's too dangerous to go down the mountain at night. Neih from the Yamahata fields was attacked by a wild dog, and I think Uncle Onza was killed by one. I'm sure dad came here because of that."

Tanda told Balsa all about the problems the village had been having over the past week or so.

Balsa snorted. "That's it? That's why your dad came?" She hoisted up her net full of fish and took them close to the well. Then she unsheathed a small knife and started scaling and boning the fish. Tanda stood next to Balsa at the well, then crouched down.

"Balsa," Tanda said, "do you believe in curses?"

Balsa stopped gutting the fish, then shrugged. "I guess I do. Who knows?" Then she saw Tanda's face and added, "But I don't think your Uncle Onza would curse your village. I think he'd be sad if you even thought he'd do something like that."

Tanda frowned. He'd never seen his uncle sad when he was alive. Uncle Onza had always been smiling. "I...don't know how he would feel. But you're probably right."

Balsa washed fish guts off her hands, then faced Tanda squarely. "I don't know anything about curses," Balsa said, "but I can't imagine your uncle going around cursing your fields or anything. What would be the point?" She frowned. "And are they blaming Onza for attacking that girl? I thought he was killed by that wild dog...your dad is stupid."

Balsa slid the boned and scaled fish into a bucket, then pulled out another fish from her net.

Tanda didn't know what to say. He felt like if he spoke, he would be arguing against his own thoughts. What the villagers believed didn't make sense, that was true, but he wasn't sure how to explain the wild dog attacks or the blackbugs. Maybe this was a curse caused by something else, and not Uncle Onza.

Balsa let Tanda sit in silence for a while, then said, "I believe in curses, but I don't think the dead curse people," she said. "If they could, it would be a lot more common. People die with a lot of grudges and hatred and regrets. If they decided to curse everyone they were still mad at, the world would be in trouble."

Balsa washed her hands with fresh water from the well. "I think Jiguro and I would both be dead, if spirits could curse us..." Balsa's tone was bitter. She drew up more water in a large bucket.

Tanda said nothing. He was looking at Balsa and thinking. Balsa wasn't looking at him. She gritted her teeth and kept her eyes on the fish and the well bucket. Tanda noticed Balsa's anger sparking to life, but it wasn't him that she was mad at. Tanda didn't know everything about Balsa's life, but he knew that she and Jiguro had been pursued by enemies for a very long time. He also knew that Jiguro had been forced to kill some of his former friends in order to keep himself and Balsa safe.

There were many things that Tanda didn't like about Balsa's situation. Overall, he thought that Balsa's personality and her own life circumstances were mismatched. She was so brave and so strong: she wasn't the kind of person that he ever expected to run from danger. She was no skittish rabbit, but a chasing wolf: violent, fast, and threatening.

Balsa looked at Tanda again, then said harshly, "If the villagers are so scared of some curse, why'd they dump your uncle's body on the edge of town, huh? I don't think spirits hold grudges or cause curses, but it's never a good thing, showing disrespect to the dead. If they wanna end the curse, they should bury him properly, yeah?"

Tanda blinked. Balsa's tone was rough, but the sentiment behind her words was kind. Tanda nodded at her. "I think you're right."

Balsa frowned like something was bothering her. She looked into Tanda's eyes like she was trying to figure him out. Then she said, "What were we talking about, anyway?"

"Dinner," Tanda said. "I think."

"Dinner?" Balsa was still frowning.

"Yeah," Tanda said. "I said I can't eat here because I'll be late going home."

Balsa's expression suddenly transformed to one of rage. "I remember," she spat. "But you *have* to eat here. Aren't you worried about that wild dog? If you don't have dinner here, you won't have the energy to outrun it if we get attacked by it on the way back to your house."

Tanda should have been used to Balsa's vehemence, but this attitude was a bit excessive, even for her. "Uh...okay. I'll eat here."

It didn't show on her face, but Balsa's anger lifted from her shoulders like a weight. She seemed...happy? Relieved?

"Okay," she said. "You cook the rice and vegetables, and I'll handle the fish."

Tanda nodded, then stood up straight. He was used to cooking for Torogai, since she often asked him to make dinner when he visited her. Balsa always seemed glad when he was there to cook dinner. She was skilled at many things, but she was not a very good cook. Tanda suspected that she couldn't cook as well as him because she was impatient. She always lifted the lid off the pot to check things, and she

was usually thinking about spear practice, so sometimes she forgot what she was responsible for making.

By the time Tanda and Balsa sat down to dinner, the sky was orange-purple with early evening shadows. They roasted fish over the low hearth in center of the hut. Tanda found some pickled vegetables and brine to use as a kind of sauce and added the leftover brine to the cooked rice.

"Delicious." Balsa licked her fingers. "The fish fatten up before winter, too. This is the best time to eat them." She was in a good mood. The oils in the fish and the savoriness of the pickles and salt satisfied a craving that she hadn't previously been aware of.

"It tastes better because Torogai uses rice that was harvested last year," Tanda said. "Most of the rice we use in the village is two years old, and it starts drying out. This stuff smells great." Tanda inhaled the steam coming off of his cooked rice with a contented expression.

"But we'll have fresh rice at my house soon," Tanda said. "After the harvest."

Balsa nodded. "I just remembered...you started bringing in the harvest, what, a week ago?"

"Five days ago," Tanda said.

"Your dad came here and asked me to help with separating out the new rice into bushels," she said.

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Yep," she said. "I helped Miss Sawa with her weeding and field work during the summer, so I guess word got around."

"I see..."

Miss Sawa lived relatively close to Tanda, so she was probably hard at work harvesting her own rice right now. He was a bit surprised that Miss Sawa had asked for help from wanderers like Jiguro and Balsa, though.

"What did you tell my dad?" Tanda asked. He assumed that if Balsa could work in the fields with him, she would.

Balsa laughed brightly. "Do you really want my help that bad?"

"Of course!" He nodded over and over again.

Balsa's expression was half-exasperated, half-fond. "All right, then. I'll come over and help until dad gets back. We probably have to leave when he does, though. Sorry."

Tanda nodded in understanding.

chapter six

Harvest time was hard on everyone in Tanda's village, especially for families that didn't have a lot of young men to work in the fields. Because of this, neighbors took turns performing menial tasks like cooking and preparing tools to free up the time of the most in-demand workers. It was Tanda's family's turn to perform those tasks today.

Tanda and his mother had been up well before dawn cooking breakfast for all the workers who would visit them. The cooked rice was packed into stewed and dried asho leaves to make it easy to carry around. The smell of asho rice always reminded Tanda of harvest time, even in adulthood.

Some of the girls who lived in the village had also come over to help Tanda and his mother cook, and to hand out supplies. There were a lot more people than normal standing around near the well and in the kitchen. It was hard for Tanda to move around without bumping into someone. The women talked as they worked, so the house was also unusually noisy.

Tanda packed the asho rice onto a large wooden plate, then went outside to deliver them to the first workers to arrive. There was quite a crowd forming outside the house.

The cool autumn breeze fluttered Tanda's clothes and pushed his hair back from his forehead. The sun hadn't risen, so all Tanda could see was the dim shapes of men and boys standing in family and friend groups, or sitting on the ground and and talking. As Tanda walked around, he realized that Balsa was there, too—but she was standing all alone.

Balsa looked around herself with an expression of vague disinterest. She was carrying a scythe.

Tanda passed his wooden plate of rice wrapped in asho leaves to his older brother. He plucked three off the plate, then dashed over to greet Balsa.

"Good morning, Balsa!"

Balsa faced him and smiled faintly. "Good morning." Her gaze dropped to the food Tanda was holding. "What's that?"

"Oh, this? It's asho rice. We make it for all the people who work in the fields and help us bring in the harvest. It's great! You're older than me and can work more, so I brought you two."

Tanda passed two servings of asho rice to Balsa. She sniffed one and grinned. "They do smell pretty good..."

"They're *really* good."

The other workers started eating their asho rice. Balsa opened her mouth wide and took a huge bite. The asho rice was still warm and all but melted in her mouth. Balsa and Tanda ate their breakfast together without speaking, enjoying the freshly made meal.

Tanda's mother came out of the house with another wooden plate of asho rice to hand out more food and greet the neighbors. When she

saw Tanda and Balsa standing together, she frowned. Balsa looked too skinny to her: tall for her age and all skin and bones. After making her rounds with the neighbors, she came over to Balsa and Tanda.

"Thanks for coming to help us today," Tanda's mother said.

Balsa looked down a bit awkwardly. "Uh, thanks for inviting me."

Tanda's mother smiled.

"We need every pair of hands we can get. I'm sure you'll be a huge help. Thank you." Tanda's mother bowed her head a little. "There's work in the kitchen, too, if you'd like to help out there."

Balsa shook her head. "I can work in the kitchen, but I'd much rather work in the fields. That's why I brought a scythe."

Tanda's mother appeared slightly surprised. "Well, if you're sure. But harvesting rice is very hard work. You might hurt yourself."

Balsa grinned. "I'll be fine. I'm very strong."

Tanda's mother still seemed concerned. Her gaze flicked to Balsa's hakama, which were so short that they barely reached her knees. "Wait a minute," she said. "I want to go grab something." She wove through the crowd of neighbors and went back into the house. She didn't return for quite some time.

Balsa and Tanda finished eating their asho rice, but Tanda's mother still hadn't returned. The field workers started to disperse so that they could start work for the day. Balsa seemed torn on whether or not she should go with them or continue to wait. She was just about to leave with the others when Tanda's mother finally came out of the house.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting for so long," she said. "I hoped to find something newer, but..." Tanda's mother crouched down in front of Balsa and pulled a pair of shin guards from her apron. She was about to put them on when Balsa took a step back.

"I can do that by myself," Balsa said.

Tanda's mother laughed. Without missing a beat, she laced up the shin guards behind Balsa's calves and pulled the strings tight.

"All done," Tanda's mother said with a satisfied nod. "If you're not used to swinging a scythe, it's easy to cut yourself when harvesting. The shin guards are old, but they should protect your legs from getting hurt."

"I, uh...thank you," Balsa said, bowing a little. She spoke quietly, like it was hard to get words out.

Tanda looked at Balsa in alarm. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear that she was about to cry.

Tanda's mother also seemed to sense Balsa's mood. She rested her hand on Balsa's shoulder and said kindly, "If you need to rest while you're working, you can come back to the house for a while. All right?"

Balsa nodded shallowly, speechless. She bowed, then stood up straight and joined the other men who were headed for the fields. She didn't look back at Tanda or his mother even once.

Some of Tanda's uncles gathered their drums and flutes and started playing a song with

the steady rhythm to help the others set a steady pace when working. The harvesters stacked up their cut bundles of rice into groups of three. Much was harvested in a short time, but the fields themselves seemed endless. Tanda's mother had not been exaggerating when she'd called harvesting rice very hard work.

Rice that wasn't cut down with enough force couldn't even be used as straw, so no one under the age of twelve was allowed to carry a scythe. Tanda and his sister walked among the harvesters, binding harvested rice into bundles with twine. They also brought water to the workers, who were sweltering under the heat of another unseasonably warm autumn day.

Some people kept harvesting even after the sun went down, but Tanda's family always stopped and returned home in the evening. So did many others, who were eager to return home to their wives and families for a substantial meal and a long rest.

After five days of steady work, the harvest was more or less complete. Balsa had kept going continuously from sunup to sundown, pausing only to eat dinner with Tanda's family. She'd stayed in Torogai's hut overnight before coming back to work. Tanda's mother asked Balsa to stay with them many times—it couldn't be good for Balsa's health to climb that steep path after working all day, and besides , the path was dangerous at the moment.

Balsa always pretended not to hear Tanda's mother and returned to Torogai's hut immediately after eating. Tanda's brothers badmouthed Balsa behind her back, but after a few days, they were forced to admit a grudging admiration for her work ethic. She worked harder and did more than many grown men.

"That girl's a natural at harvesting," Tanda's uncle said. "She's better than anyone else we have out there. She's as strong as the horses that Kanbal's so famous for. She doesn't look like much, but she lifts with her legs and she's stronger than she looks. Her cuts are also smooth and even—I didn't see a single ragged edge on the rice. We'll have no shortage of good straw this year."

Tanda had noticed how Balsa cut the rice, precise and even: she repeated each movement exactly without any variation that he could see. He told Balsa that his uncle had praised her.

Balsa seemed pleased by the praise, but she made no attempt to become friends with the family. She kept herself apart from people, aside from Tanda.

With the harvest over, it was time for the autumn festival to Ten no Kami, the God of the Heavens. The first crops of the season were offered to the god at the festival. The villagers would pray to have a good harvest again next year, then have a feast. Tanda's uncle invited Balsa to come to the festival several times, as did Tanda, so she couldn't even pretend not to hear them. She came down the mountain from Torogai's hut on the day of the festival.

It was cloudy that morning, but by the time the offerings of rice were all brought to the village square around noon, the sky was almost clear. Villagers sang and danced to celebrate the day. The weather was

cool and seasonable: a pleasant reprieve from the heat of the past few days. Flutes set a cheerful rhythm as the villagers danced and laughed.

Many merchants had come from Kosenkyo's Lower Fan with goods to sell. Food stalls and candy vendors lined up along the street. Children ran around buying food and candy, dazzled by the bright red and yellow colors that people from the capital wore.

Tanda didn't enter the dancers' circle. He went with Balsa to the candy sellers. Afterward, Tanda invited Balsa to dance, but she declined.

"I don't dance," Balsa said flatly. "Besides, I can see it all from here."

Balsa didn't seem upset or anything, but Tanda didn't want to leave her alone in the crowd. He suspected that if he did go with his family to dance, he would lose sight of Balsa almost right away. She wouldn't just vanish like that unless she really wanted to leave, but Tanda didn't think she'd tell him something like that.

That was why Tanda stayed near Balsa at the food and candy stores. Bullies wouldn't bother him at all if he stayed close to Balsa.

"Water candy!" a vendor called out in a clear, loud voice like a bell. "Water candy to celebrate the season and the clear sky! Water candy..."

The candies were striped red and yellow. The vendor was a middle-aged man whose cadence was almost musical. He reminded Tanda of his uncle Onza, although...

"...uncle Onza would dance while he sang," Tanda said sadly. "That man's not like him at all."

"Huh? Who?" Balsa asked.

Tanda didn't answer.

Balsa frowned, looking between Tanda and the water candy seller. "I see. So it's that guy. You can buy whatever you want. He's got bubble candy, prayer rope, bells and stuff..."

Tanda remembered that uncle Onza had sold water candy at last year's festival, but he wasn't here this year. Uncle Onza would never sing or dance or sell candy to children ever again. When Tanda thought about that, the whole world seemed drained of color.

The dancers in the center of the festival circle melted into the crowd, giving the next set of dancers a turn.

"Are you gonna buy candy or not?" Balsa asked.

Balsa's voice returned Tanda to his senses. He nodded. "Uh, yeah, we can get candy," he said. "And I want some seared chicken. I think that lady over there has some."

Tanda and Balsa walked over to a short middle-aged woman searing pieces of bird meat over an open flame. The meat was soaked in oil before searing, and cooking the meat sealed all the juices in. The smell of the smoke coming from the woman's stall was savory-sweet and very inviting. Tanda was relieved to have Balsa next to him and the water candy seller behind him, fading into the distance.

Balsa and Tanda each bought a piece of seared chicken from the woman. When Balsa bit into it, she grinned from ear to ear. "This is fantastic!"

The woman cooking the seared meat smiled kindly at Balsa. "Isn't it? In Kosenkyo, most of the food stalls sell chicken with crispy skin that's been fried. I like that, but I like that kind of chicken better. That's

why I make it. The meat is brined in a secret, special sauce that's been passed down by my family for generations."

Balsa took an enormous bite of her seared chicken. Mouth full, she asked, "Do you sell food in the capital, too?"

"I do!" she said. "Right along the road near the Blue Bow River, on Aogakisui Street. If you'd like to eat this chicken again, please come and see me."

"You wanna go to the city and eat some of this with me sometime?" Balsa asked. "I'm sure dad would love it. I'm pretty sure we're taking a job in the Lower Fan next."

"That would be nice," Tanda said. He sighed.

Balsa narrowed her eyes. "Tanda…what's wrong?"

"I…just don't know if I'll be allowed to visit the Lower Fan," Tanda said. "I've only been there twice before."

Balsa threw away her skewer in a basket near the food stalls after she finished eating her meat. "I guess there are some good things about being a wanderer," she said. "Seems like villagers always stay in their villages. Dad and I don't have to do that. At least your mom and uncle are nice, yeah?"

Balsa glanced over Tanda's shoulder. "Looks like your uncle's trying to get your attention."

Sure enough, when Tanda turned, he saw his uncle waving at him.

"Yeah." Tanda waved back. "We need to start lining up to offer the rice crops. We dedicate them to the god at the temple and pray for the village to have another good harvest next year."

Tanda heard a shrill whistle coming from the flutists. The singing and dancing was over; it was time for the special ceremonies that were unique to the harvest festival. The dancers and performers started forming a line and heading toward the temple.

Balsa and Tanda came up to Tanda's uncle, who passed them each a small bundle of rice that was neatly wrapped in twine. Even the twine was decorative and festive.

"There we go," Tanda's uncle said. "Line up, and don't fall behind, kids."

The line moved slowly, so Tanda, his uncle, and Balsa were easily able to keep up with the others. They walked along the paths through the rice fields toward the village to the west. Tanda could see the shapes of houses and farmsteads casting shadows as the sun started going down.

"They've put the tolcha out," Tanda said, pointing. Tolcha were pictures of the dead that were suspended on wooden or bamboo poles outside of people's houses. Every year, families that were mourning a death drew the visage of the departed person on a wooden sign in thick black ink. The signs were then placed over that family member's grave. Some farmsteads had actual cemeteries enclosed by stone walls, so the people who lived there placed their tolcha outside the walls so that they could be easily carried up to the temple.

"What are tolcha for?" Balsa asked.

Tanda smiled. "That's right. You've never been to a harvest festival before, so you don't know about the tolcha. They're the faces of the dead, who now protect our villages."

Some of the tolcha were discolored because of this year's rainy season. Tanda saw people placing more tolcha over graves with exaggerated care. When people carrying tolcha had to pass through the long line of villagers, the villagers made a gap so that they could pass.

It was near sunset, and the branches of the trees overhead cast angled shadows. The autumn sky was a deep, rich red color. The last light of the sun played over the faces of Balsa and the villagers as they started to climb up a steep mountain path. There was a mountain pass at the edge of the village that they were all heading for.

The mountain pass was a grassy place dotted with trees. Occasionally, Tanda pointed out small shrines along the path that were about the size of a gathering basket. These tiny shrines were made of wood, and were the perfect size for leaving small offerings. As Tanda and Balsa climbed, they saw more and more shrines, some with bouquets of wildflowers or bottles of rice wine under them. There were also some larger shrines with proper altars. Some of the aged men and women making this steep climb stopped at these larger shrines for a brief rest before continuing on.

At the end of the path, there was a temple. Several old men and women sat outside it. When they saw the procession approaching, two old men rose from their seats and opened the doors of the temple.

Balsa had climbed up this mountain path many times, but she'd never seen the inside of the temple before. The temple was very large: there were a few thousand tolcha standing up in neat rows within it. A hush fell over the crowd as they took in the sight of all these tolcha. Some of the tolcha were so ancient and worn by wind and rain that the faces painted on the wooden boards had been all but erased.

Those entrusted with the task of removing the tolcha from their graves and placing them in the temple started moving up the path. As they did, villagers called out, "Grandma, grandpa, watch over me!"

"May our ancestors protect us."

"Gods honor our ancient relatives."

"Please grant us a good harvest like the one we had this year, great-grandfather."

The villagers took up their bundles of rice and placed them on an altar inside the temple. Then they closed their eyes and bowed their heads, chanting prayers. The smallest children seemed a bit confused at the proceedings, but they bowed their heads and imitated their parents.

People further down the path also bowed their heads in prayer. The quiet stillness of the evening was broken by the murmuring sound of their chanting.

Balsa approached the altar, set her bundle of rice down on it, bowed her head and closed her eyes. She muttered a few words of thanks, then stepped back quickly into the crowd, trying not to stand out.

Tanda approached the altar with his uncle and prayed with all his might. When he opened his eyes, he saw Balsa a little ways away, shrouded in gloom. She was waiting for him.

After all the villagers had offered their rice and their prayers, the same old men who had opened the temple doors closed them. People started heading back to their villages in groups of two and three, carrying their bundles of rice in their hands. Offering the rice was merely ceremonial; now that it had been blessed, people were free to take it home.

Balsa hadn't known this, so she'd left her rice on the altar. Tanda's uncle passed her bundle of rice back to her. "This rice has been blessed," he explained. "While the blessing lasts, the grains of this rice can cure all kinds of illnesses. Hold on to it for as long as you can, until you need the strength that it will give you."

Balsa thanked Tanda's uncle and accepted the bundle of rice into her hands.

Tanda was standing in the grassy area below the temple, watching people leave. When his uncle called out to him, he ran over to his uncle and Balsa.

Balsa noticed that there were still many tolcha standing on graves as they descended the path. "When do tolcha get carried to the temple?" she asked.

"When their faces are no longer recognizable," Tanda's uncle said. "In the temple, some small piece of our ancestors is preserved, so that they can watch over us forever."

An old woman who was ahead of them in the long line called out to Tanda's uncle. Tanda's uncle excused himself, leaving Balsa and Tanda alone.

Balsa walked beside Tanda in silence for a while. She noticed that Tanda seemed troubled.

"Is something wrong?" Balsa asked.

"Uncle Onza died…somewhere around here," Tanda said, voice quiet. "I looked for the place where he was attacked, but I couldn't find it. You're supposed to flowers on the place where a person died, but I…"

Balsa considered for a moment, then called out to Tanda's uncle. "Sir!"

Tanda's uncle turned back to her.

"I forgot that I have to run an errand," she said. "I'll come back right away when I'm done, so please don't worry. I'll take Tanda with me so I don't get lost."

Tanda's uncle nodded, then turned back to the old woman who was walking next to him.

Balsa took Tanda's hand and whispered, "We're going back up the mountain. Follow me."

Tanda looked at her, puzzled. She passed him her blessed bundle of rice.

"We'll put this on your uncle Onza's grave," Balsa said. "C'mon. Let's go find it."

Tanda blinked in confusion. "But…I just told you that I couldn't find the place."

"You didn't have me looking with you," Balsa said. "Besides, it's gotta be in that grassy spot somewhere." Then she tugged Tanda's arm straight and started walking up the mountain path.

chapter seven

The rice fields were still brown and green, but the whole world surrounding them was redolent with bright autumn colors. The children of Tanda's village came out of their houses in the early morning with their breath steaming in front of their faces. They pointed at all the leaves on the trees and the boundary line where the cold mist rose up to the mountains. That line marked where the snow would fall that winter. In late autumn, the leaves fell so thickly from the trees that it was possible to hear them all fluttering to the forest floor from far off.

After the rice was harvested and dried, the villagers would get a bit of a rest from working in the fields. This time of rest was when many marriages took place. Neih, who had raised the alarm about the terror of the wild dog, had gotten married at just such a time in the village of Yasugi. She'd received the gift of a beautiful sash on her wedding day.

After the harvested rice was put up in storehouses for the winter, the villagers paid their taxes. Whatever was left over could be sold for a profit. The villagers never made too much money that way, but what little they gained could be used to buy new clothes or material to make them, or new kitchen implements and tools.

Late autumn was the time when young men and women, especially those who were to be married, did the most shopping.

The young women who were to be married went down the mountain path to the city in their best clothes, with tiny prayer bells jangling from waist sashes embroidered with golden thread. It was a custom for families whose daughters were getting married to send their oldest sons to the market for sashes of this type. He would buy them for his sisters before the wedding day. The custom was so common that there were songs written about it. The villagers started to sing them as soon as the rice harvest was over.

The girls who wore these special sashes showed them off to one another with expressions of pride. They were farmers' daughters for the most part and unaccustomed to having such a fine and delicate accessory. They went to the city and came back with their sashes tied firmly around their waists. The girls who were to be married wore the sashes every day from the time their brothers bought them until their wedding day.

Neih should have gotten married the year before, but the family she was supposed to marry into had a sudden death of a daughter and spent the year in mourning. Neih had spent the entire year with the sash tied around her waist.

The path leading down from the mountain villages to Kosenkyo gradually leveled off. The village of Yasugi was just downriver along the side of the road. Huge koza trees lined the road on either side. There were a number of large, flat stones underneath the wide-spreading branches of the trees that were the perfect size and shape to sit on. Travelers and shoppers took a

rest there after coming down the mountain, or before heading back to their villages.

Tanda's uncle Onza had always rested on those stones with a basket of sweets in his lap while he smoked a pipe full of sweet-smelling cholu. The rumor was that a wild dog had attacked and killed someone right in this spot, though no one seemed to know if the rumors were true. Autumn was getting on, so people had to get their shopping done, and the place was as crowded as it usually was.

But the rumor was spreading. Men and women returned to their homes and told their parents about the attack breathlessly, like they couldn't believe it themselves. Tanda heard the rumor, too, among kids who were playing in the village square. What surprised him the most was that the rumors weren't about uncle Onza, but someone else.

One of the kids said he was the cousin of a man who'd been attacked by a wild dog at the foot of the mountain. He talked to everyone who would listen about what he knew.

"Y'all probably know my cousin already, but if ya don't, well, you should know that he isn't weak or nothin'. Right?"

The other children surrounding him nodded solemnly. His cousin was a grown man with a large build. They'd seen him carrying huge stacks of firewood up and down the mountain path many times.

"My uncle went over to old man Taroka's house to yell at him," the kid said. "My cousin wouldn't care about something like that, though. He's not scared of some lame ghost."

One of the children listening frowned in confusion.

The kid looked at him and said, "Huh? Don't you know what I'm talking about?"

The child shook his head.

The other kids rolled their eyes. "Seriously, haven't you been listening at all?"

"Did you hit your head or something?"

Children could be cruel.

The kid whose cousin had been attacked cut in, saying, "Fine, I'll explain it again." There was another rumor that the wild dog that had attacked his cousin was possessed by the unquiet spirit of Tanda's uncle Onza, who'd been killed by it. People assumed that Onza's spirit was angry and wandering because of his indecent burial.

"Yeah, I knew all that already," the confused kid said.

"Then why did you give me that look all of a sudden?"

"'Cuz I don't understand why your uncle would yell at Mr. Taroka."

"'Cuz it's all Taroka's fault! Onza's spirit wouldn't be possessing the wild dog if Taroka had just buried his brother properly! That's why my uncle went over there—to talk some sense into that blockhead."

Tanda leaned forward. "Did Taroka say anything?" he asked.

"Not much," the kid said. "He got real mad. Started cursing out Onza for abandoning his family. My uncle said he turned beet red."

The children listening were silent. Taroka was usually kind to children, praising them for their work and patting them on the head. None of them had ever seen him angry before. They couldn't imagine him cursing or yelling or anything like that.

"Is that true?" one of the children asked.

The kid shrugged. "Taroka doesn't believe that the wild dog is possessed by Onza's spirit. He said that if the wild dog attacks again, he'll go dig Onza up and burn the body just to be sure."

The other children appeared shocked. Villagers only burned their dead if they'd died of some kind of infectious illness. Thinking about the usually kind Taroka doing such violence to his brother's body made them shudder.

The children dispersed and started going back to their houses. Tanda went as well, thinking hard about what the others had said. *Uncle Onza hated working in the fields, just like me. What would happen if I ever left the village?*

His older brothers would be angry—very, very angry. And Noshir was angry with him all the time without even having a reason. He thought about Taroka threatening to burn Onza's body, red-faced and shouting, and wondered if his own brothers would ever hate him so much. He felt terrible for his uncle Onza. He didn't deserve what Taroka had said.

Birds flew overhead, twittering to one another as Tanda walked along the path at the edge of the rice fields back to his house. Tanda listened to the birds, looking up at the gloomy sky. It was still early afternoon, but the quality of the sunlight was weak and pale, like a premonition of winter.

Tanda didn't want to go home. His older brothers would probably badmouth uncle Onza again. They'd say that they understood how Taroka felt. Tanda didn't want to hear that: any of it. He turned on his

heel, leaving the main path to the village as he dashed up the mountain to Torogai's hut.

When Tanda reached Torogai's hut, it was quiet. "Balsa?" he asked. "Are you there?"

Balsa heard Tanda as he walked through the rushes outside the hut and came outside.

"You came at a good time," Balsa said with a little smile. "I was about to make dinner."

"Is Torogai coming home?" Tanda's voice was rough-edged with desperation. "Do you know when she's coming back?"

Balsa stopped smiling. "Well, she isn't home yet. And she didn't tell me when she'd be coming back, either. Is something wrong?"

Tanda started speaking in a long stream of words like a gush of water from a newly broken dam. His lips trembled as he held back tears. He didn't know himself why he felt so sad, but he felt like he would cry if he didn't stop himself.

Balsa listened attentively until Tanda stopped speaking. She didn't interrupt. When Tanda finished, she considered for a short while, then asked, "Is there something you wanted from Torogai?"

Yes, but Tanda didn't know exactly what he should ask *for*. What he really wanted was to tell her everything that he'd just told Balsa. Torogai was very wise. He had to believe that she'd know what to do.

"You want her to get rid of the wild dog or something?" Balsa asked.

"Uh...yeah," Tanda said. He looked down. Tears dripped down his nose and fell to the ground.

"Hey, now," Balsa said. She sounded uncomfortable. "Don't cry..." She frowned. "I know it must be hard in the village, ‘cuz everyone's badmouthing your uncle. But I think that if he were here, he wouldn't care. He cared about you, not what people said."

Tanda sniffled, still crying. He didn't look at Balsa, but he was listening.

"I've seen a lot of dumb people like the ones in the village," Balsa said. "Men in bars get drunk and talk big, but they're pushovers. The villagers speak badly of your uncle to make them feel better about themselves. None of what they say is actually true. Your uncle and that other guy that the wild dog attacked didn't even have anything in common, did they? Sometimes a wild dog is just a wild dog."

Tanda looked up at Balsa. He understood that she was trying to cheer him up, and it was working, for the most part. Her words were like a shaft of sunlight parting gloomy clouds within his mind. But Balsa wasn't right about why he was upset—not completely.

"Yeah, but...I mean, *some* of what the villagers say is true. My uncle Onza was irresponsible, and I can understand why some people would be mad at him. But I can't understand why anyone would think he'd attack people, even as a spirit. It doesn't make sense."

Tanda tried his best to be precise about what he was thinking and feeling. "I can understand a jealous ghost of a woman who died before

she could get married attacking someone carrying one of those special marriage sashes…maybe," Tanda said. "But uncle Onza would never do that." He nodded at his own words.

Every time Tanda considered the idea that his uncle had become a wandering spirit, he remembered his uncle's smiling face. Uncle Onza was not the sort of man to curse people, in life or in death. Sometimes, he'd play with the village children and pretend to be a monster to make them laugh, but he'd never so much as frightened anyone, at least not on purpose. Tanda remembered his uncle exactly as he was, and he couldn't envision what he would even look like as a vengeful spirit.

Tanda was angry and sad because everyone in the village knew Onza. They knew his smile, his character, his personality, and they still talked about him becoming an evil spirit like it was normal and natural and expected.

"I...feel sorry for uncle Onza," Tanda said. Tears streaked his cheeks. "Remember when he used to play monster with us? But he's not a monster. It's like people think that he is, though. Taroka said he'd burn Onza's body if there was another wild dog attack. But I feel sorry for Taroka, too. He was never mean before, and I can't understand how he could ever hate his brother so much..."

"Isn't Taroka pretty much a stranger?" Balsa asked. "You shouldn't feel sorry for him at all."

The roughness of Balsa's tone made Tanda flinch.

"But anyway, if you feel that way about Onza, why not be sure? You can go down to that place where Onza and that other guy were attacked. Onza wouldn't attack you or anything."

Tanda's mouth fell open. Make sure...wasn't that dangerous? But it was a good idea, regardless. Uncle Onza wasn't dangerous to him. "You're right," Tanda said. "I'll go. I'll be sure."

Tanda's strong resolve was in sharp contrast to his previous outburst. Balsa snorted with laughter. "You're not scared, right?"

"Nope."

Tanda got goosebumps whenever he thought about running into the ravenous wild dog, but he didn't feel any fear about going to the place where his uncle had died. He felt like it was a place that he should go to, if only just once.

Balsa sighed, ruffled Tanda's hair, then held out her hand. "You probably should be more frightened, but whatever. I'll go with you to protect you. I'd have nightmares forever if you got eaten by that wild dog."

chapter eight

Rain fell starting late that evening into the afternoon, when the sky finally started clearing up. Tanda ran out of his house after dinner and headed to Torogai's. Puddles in the path reflected the red light of the setting sun. Tanda leaped over the puddles.

The temple where the tolcha were stored came into view at the top of the path. Balsa was already there, waiting for him. Tanda waved. "Balsa!"

Balsa stood up, short spear over her shoulder.

Tanda doubled over. He had a painful stitch in his side.

Balsa laughed. "You know better than to run so fast right after dinner," she said.

Tanda frowned, then stood up straight. "I'm fine," he said. "It already feels better."

The rumor of the wild dog had spread widely, so Tanda hadn't seen any other people on the path. The only sounds were those of birds returning to their nests for the evening. Balsa and Tanda walked downhill together, toward the koza trees and large stones that people often rested at while traveling. The leaves of the koza tree were always green, even in the depths of winter. The bright and brilliant autumn

colors of the surrounding trees were in sharp contrast to the dark green of the koza trees.

The path forked to the left and right. The right fork led to Kosenkyo, while the left fork led to the other villages that were downriver. Tanda stood under the koza trees on a rock with a very serious expression. Balsa looked like she wanted to laugh—Tanda was never so serious—but she refrained.

"Want me to stay down here with you?" Balsa asked.

"You promised to watch from the tree," Tanda said.

"All righty then. Don't get eaten." Balsa squeezed Tanda's shoulder, then turned around, setting her small pack against the trunk of a tree. She placed her spear upright next to her pack, then climbed up a koza tree and was swallowed up in its dark branches.

"Hand me my spear," Balsa said after she'd found a good spot to keep watch. Tanda picked up her spear and lifted it all the way over his head. He was surprised by how heavy it was, but he tried not to show it.

Balsa gripped the spear, then stood upright in the tree with the spear next to her on the branch. "All right, good. You stand there. That way, if you're attacked, I'll be able to stab whatever it is before it reaches you."

Tanda nodded, then moved to where Balsa was pointing. He remembered seeing Balsa running yasu fish through with her spear when they were at the river together and frowned a little. He didn't want to be attacked by the wild dog, of course, but he also didn't want to see Balsa stab anything again.

Darkness fell. Even the birds went quiet. Tanda heard nothing but slight rustling in the grass when an animal passed by and the sound of his own breathing. The weight of the stillness overwhelmed him, making him even more nervous. "Balsa," he whispered.

"Yeah?" Balsa whispered back, her voice echoing slightly overhead.

"Nothing. I thought you might be asleep."

Balsa snorted, though she kept it quiet. "As if I'd fall asleep while standing in a tree."

Tanda took a step closer to the tree. The grove was shrouded in deep gloom, and only the path leading into the city was visible. It was a damp night, and cold. Tanda had sweated through his clothes while running here, and the evening chill made him shiver. He wished now that he'd thought to bring a coat, even though it would have slowed him down. He rubbed his trembling arms to warm them and felt goosebumps rising on his legs.

A shrill sound like that of a high-pitched hand flute pierced the dark stillness. Tanda crouched down instinctively, feeling suddenly afraid. It was probably just an unusual bird call, but Tanda thought that the sound resembled the cry of an infant. The grass rustled all around him, but Tanda saw nothing.

Suddenly, Tanda released his grip on himself and came all the way up to the tree where Balsa was standing guard.

"What are you doing?" Balsa asked.

Tanda found two branches with his hands and settled the sole of one foot on the tree trunk. "I'm coming by you," Tanda said.

"You can't! The branch will break if it has to support both of us," Balsa hissed in irritation.

Tanda's mouth snapped shut. His lower lip trembled. He didn't reply to Balsa, but he looked for another branch near hers so that he could climb up.

"Not that one," Balsa said. She reached out and pulled Tanda's wrist over to a different, fatter branch that was slightly higher up. "This one."

Tanda was about to pull himself up to the branch when Balsa shushed him. "Don't move," she whispered. Tanda clung to the tree and waited. Balsa sounded like she was on edge. She let go of his hand slowly and stood up straight, holding her spear in both hands.

Tanda felt something cold and wet along the back of his neck and went rigid. There was heat emanating from behind him. He heard footsteps squishing into the slightly muddy ground of the grove. Tanda guessed that a very large beast was here, and coming closer. The beast took heavy, panting breaths as it approached.

Slowly, carefully, Tanda released his grip on the tree and landed on the ground. He turned and saw two blue-white eyes staring at him in the darkness. He could see nothing else of the wild dog, but he smelled its breath, which reeked of blood. Tanda had been scared of being alone in the dark before, but now, the nature of his fear was completely different. The light in the wild dog's eyes started to spread out, illuminating its entire body. The tips of its long fur glinted like a koza tree's evergreen leaves on a day of fresh snow, clear white in the darkness. Tanda tried squinting to see the wild dog better, but the light surrounding it was dim and did not brighten past a certain point.

Then Tanda smelled something very familiar.

"Uncle...Onza?" The wild dog smelled like the water candy that his uncle sold at festivals every year.

The light surrounding the wild dog intensified. The brightest illumination still came from the very tips of the wild dog's fur. Some of the fur was shed into the air, like long pieces of thread. The fur was still attached to the wild dog, but it expanded the range of light even further. Tanda had no trouble seeing the wild dog now.

The semi-detached fur started to form into a different shape, but it collapsed before the formation was complete. Tanda was able to recognize the shape before it disappeared, though.

Uncle Onza's face. It really is him.

Tanda heard his uncle's voice cry out, "Sis...ter..." before fading away. The fur that the wild dog had shed returned to him and reattached. The dog began to shake like he was trying to dry himself after swimming, but Tanda didn't see any water on the dog anywhere.

Then the wild dog howled. Not loudly, but Tanda heard it. It sounded like a cry of grief. The dog started scratching with his hind legs. The light surrounding the wild dog dimmed, though it didn't go out.

"Uncle Onza," Tanda whispered, "are you...still here? With us?"

The wild dog's ears pricked up. He stared very seriously at Tanda for a moment, then lowered his head. Still looking at his feet, the wild dog shuffled closer.

Tanda heard Balsa shift overhead and cried out, "Don't hurt him!"

The wild dog came a few steps closer to Tanda, then passed behind a tree. He didn't come out again. The grove was quiet and still.

Balsa jumped down from the tree, landing next to Tanda with a muffled thump. Tanda blinked and looked over at her. He was sweating all over and started shivering again.

"You okay?" Balsa asked. She gripped his shoulder.

Tanda nodded shallowly. Balsa's hand felt too warm. "Balsa...did you see it? My uncle's face?"

Balsa shook her head. "Nope."

"But you saw the fur light up, right? And some of his fur came off and turned into a face for a few seconds...you really didn't see anything?"

"No, I didn't," Balsa said flatly. "All I saw was the wild dog. I got the sense that it didn't want to be seen, and it's definitely not starving. I don't think it wanted to attack you."

Balsa bent down to retrieve her pack, which she'd placed at the base of the tree. She rifled around inside the pack and pulled out a tinderbox, which she used to light a small torch. There was nothing oppressive or frightening about the darkness now. It seemed like just an ordinary night.

"Are you sure that you saw his face?" Balsa asked.

Tanda nodded. "I heard him talk, too. He said, 'sister.'"

Balsa absorbed this information, then planted her feet on the mountain path. "You should get home. Your mom'll be worried. I can go with you and apologize for keeping you out late."

Tanda followed Balsa down the path, but he kept looking back, craning his neck and searching for some sign of the wild dog. "I think...uncle Onza wanted to talk to me," he said.

Balsa struck him on the back, a bit harder than she'd intended. Tanda gasped. "Quit with that," Balsa said.

"With what?" Tanda asked.

"If you're right, it'll mean more trouble," Balsa said. "You've seen the wild dog, so I think you should just leave this whole situation alone." She seized Tanda by the wrist and dragged him up the path.

Tanda bent his knees to prevent himself from being dragged and twisted away from Balsa. "Hey, let me go! Stop! Are you angry or something?"

Balsa stopped moving. She turned to face Tanda with stern eyes and a worried expression, still holding onto his wrist. "He's dead, and you shouldn't get involved," Balsa said. "Don't you understand that?" Her voice shook with the force of her anger—or concern. "You should. If you go digging around now, it could be dangerous for you. That's why I told you to quit. Let it go."

"But—"

"—even if that dog has your uncle's spirit or whatever, it's not like you can take him home! He's a wandering spirit now."

Tears clouded Tanda's vision. He tried to yank his arm out of Balsa's strong grip, but Balsa tightened her hold. They stood there on the mountain path, hands connected and eyes nailed together. Tanda cried out, weeping openly, unable to hold in what he was feeling any longer. He started thrashing around, trying desperately to free himself.

Balsa let him go. Tanda tripped over his own feet and landed on the ground.

"Stop being such a baby!" Balsa said. "I'm just stating facts. That's no reason to cry. This is why other kids bully you all the time. She turned, putting her back to Tanda, and started walking up the path alone. Tanda stared at her retreating back, still crying, not bothering to keep his voice down.

Tanda crouched on the path with his head in his knees, crying until he ran out of tears. The ground under him was cold. Numbness seeped into his bones. It was almost sunrise: he and Balsa had been out for much of the night. Tanda stayed still and watched the sun creep up over the horizon.

Tanda exhausted himself with crying. Everything he felt seemed distant and far away as the bright morning sun illuminated the path. Uncle Onza had called out for his sister last night. Where was he now? Was his spirit sleeping inside the wild dog? Would he remain there until the wild dog died? What happened to bodies possessed by spirits?

Uncle Onza must have been lonely...why else would do something like this?

Tanda's uncle Onza never had a home to return to after leaving the village while he was alive. He was dead now, but he still had no place to belong.

Tanda was no longer crying, but his nose ran. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and stood up.

Balsa returned to the temple where the tolcha were held and sat down on the same stones the elders had rested on before they'd opened the doors for the harvest festival ceremony. The stones were very cold. A torch burned next to her, propped upright; her spear was in front of her. She was rubbing her face with both hands.

"Idiot," Balsa muttered to herself. She could still hear Tanda crying. "He's such a baby..."

She was saying the same things she had before, but there was no heat to them. Balsa sounded frustrated, more than anything. She was shivering, but it wasn't from the cold.

Balsa was scared.

Not of the wild dog: no. She was frightened of what Tanda had seen and heard. She believed him, since Tanda didn't lie, but she feared that his ability to see and hear such things was dangerous. What if he stopped living in the world of the real, and was drawn into that other world that only he and Torogai could see, leaving her behind?

Balsa was frightened and angry at the same time, but she hadn't actually meant to make Tanda cry. She listened to Tanda's voice in the distance for what felt like a long time. Then she stood up, gripped her torch and went back down the path. She still had to take Tanda home.

chapter nine

Autumn passed in the blink of an eye, and the season changed to winter.

On one chilly morning, Balsa left Torogai's hut and went down to Tanda's village. All the grass and mountain vegetation were covered in a fine layer of frost.

Balsa paused in the doorway of Tanda's house, watching his mother preparing breakfast next to the fire. "Good morning," Balsa said politely.

Tanda's mother blinked in surprise, then looked toward the door. She smiled. "Good morning. You're here very early. Is there something you need?"

"I, uh, wanted to talk to Tanda," Balsa said. "Is he here?"

Tanda's mother shook her head. "He went to the town hall already. He went just after breakfast, carrying paper and ink...he's much more enthusiastic about that than field work."

After the harvest was over, scholars from Kosenkyo traveled to New Yogo's villages to teach people how to read, write, and do basic mathematics. Tanda had always been very diligent about studying and went to the town hall every morning at this time of year.

But Balsa knew that Tanda was not at the town hall this morning. She'd stopped there first, before coming to Tanda's house, and he wasn't there.

What is he doing? Where is he?

Balsa thought for a moment, then nodded to herself. Tanda had carried ink and paper somewhere, but he hadn't gone to the town hall. There was only one other place he could be. "Okay," she said to Tanda's mother. "I'll stop by again later. Thanks." Balsa bowed her head, then left.

Balsa passed by a large group of girls gathered by the communal well. They were talking excitedly about something, but Balsa didn't pause to listen. She climbed up the steep path to the village's temple. She hadn't gone far before she caught sight of someone in the distance. No one went up to the temple in winter; there was no real reason to.

Tanda sat on the stones outside the temple, drawing something in his lap. He was so absorbed in what he was doing that he didn't notice Balsa was there until her shadow passed over the piece of wood he was drawing on.

"That's a tolcha, isn't it?" Balsa asked.

Tanda's hands stilled. He looked up at her and nodded. His fingers were already red from cold. He had created a very good likeness of his uncle Onza's face on the plank of untreated wood, but he seemed dissatisfied. "I don't think it turned out too well..."

Balsa looked closer and noticed that the lines of ink around the nose and eyes were a bit jagged, but Onza was still recognizable. She grinned. "I dunno, it makes me want to smile. I think Onza would like that."

Tanda had been hard at work on this tolcha since the night he'd encountered the wild dog, but he hadn't been able to make much headway until autumn was over. His family had needed his help to prepare for winter.

Tanda waited for the ink on the tolcha to dry, then stood up.

"Where will you put it?" Balsa asked.

"In the grove of koza trees," Tanda said. He lifted the tolcha and started walking down the path. Balsa followed him a little more slowly.

The grove wasn't far. Winter had withered many of the trees in the forest, but the leaves of the koza trees were still fresh and green.

"I'll put it behind this tree here," Tanda said. "That way, no one will notice from the road." Tanda didn't want the tolcha to cause a stir, since people from the nearby villages would certainly know what it was. He set up the tolcha and spread out the branches a little to hide it better among the koza tree's large leaves.

The roots of the tree had been clawed by an animal recently. Tanda saw small tufts of fur blowing in the slight breeze. Tanda knelt down and touched the tree roots with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong?" Balsa asked.

"There's something here..." Tanda held his breath, then reached under the damaged tree roots. There was a small package wrapped in oiled paper wedged beneath them. Tanda extracted the package carefully and unwrapped it. "What is this?" he asked, standing up so that he could show Balsa.

There was a long sash inside the package. The oiled paper had protected it from the worst of the dirt and rain, but there were a few

splotchy places. Tanda cleaned it up a little by shaking it, and discovered finely detailed embroidery at the edges of the shawl. As he shook it, a few tiny white mothballs fell to the ground.

The shawl was a special marriage sash. It looked like a very expensive one. The word "Ori" was stitched along one edge of the sash in gold thread.

Tanda and Balsa locked eyes. "This was uncle Onza's," he said. His throat felt too dry.

Balsa nodded. "Ori is your uncle Onza's older sister, right?"

"Yeah."

But why was this sash hidden here?

Tanda and Balsa stood in the grove, looking at the sash. The mothballs were still potent and the smell stung their noses a little.

"I think uncle Onza came here that night to find this," Tanda said. But he hadn't been able to retrieve it. The gap under the tree roots was too narrow for the wild dog.

The sky was overcast that day, but a shaft of pale winter sunlight cut through the clouds and shone into the grove.

"Why would he put something like that here? It got all dirty," Balsa said.

"I think he wanted to give it to Ori before her wedding," Tanda said.

Balsa reached out and touched the sash. "But that doesn't really make sense."

"Huh?"

"Ori got married, what, ten years ago? More? But the paper it's wrapped in isn't anywhere close to that old. It would be in a lot worse shape, see?" she asked, pointing to the oiled paper.

But if Onza hadn't bought this sash for Ori's wedding, what was it for? Why had he bought it, and when?

Tanda looked up at the mountain path where it forked. One road led to Kosenkyo, but the other led to Yasugi, where Ori lived. The sun shone on the path, though the rest of the world was covered in gray clouds. Tanda took that as a sign. Yasugi wasn't too far from here. Tanda wondered why Onza would bring the sash all the way here and not bother taking it the rest of the way.

Onza had often come to this grove in his travels to rest and smoke cholu on his way to Tanda's village, but in the long years since he'd left home, he hadn't visited Ori once. What was Onza thinking when he sat here, in easy reach of Yasugi, with the sash hidden under the tree?

Balsa took the sash carefully from Tanda's hands, folded it, and wrapped it in the oiled paper again before stowing it in her pack. "I'll take it to Ori," she said. "Yasugi isn't that far out of the way for me."

"What? You're going to Yasugi?"

Balsa nodded, but she was frowning. "Uh, dad came home yesterday and said that some of the people chasing after us found out about Torogai's hut, so it looks like we might have to leave New Yogo for a

while." She stared at the path to Yasugi and didn't so much as glance in Tanda's direction.

"So you're leaving," Tanda said.

Balsa turned to face Tanda. "Yeah."

"When?"

"Tomorrow morning at dawn."

Tanda bit his lip. "Where are you going?"

"Rota."

Rota was so far away—much farther than Yasugi, and even farther away than the capital.

"It's going to snow soon...is it really safe for you to go?"

Balsa avoided Tanda's gaze and muttered, "Dad said it'll be fine if we stay out of cities and keep to the small villages along the South Imperial Highway. But it's a long way, and kind of roundabout. I told him I'd rather stay in Shirogai over winter before crossing the mountains, so we'll see what happens."

Balsa was leaving—going away far beyond Yasugi and the capital to a completely different country. Tanda and Balsa looked at one another for a moment that stretched, unsure of what to say.

Then Balsa turned back toward the grove and shouted in a bright, clear voice: "Yo, Onza! Tanda found your sash!" Birds scattered in surprise at Balsa's sudden shout. "I'll get it to your sister for sure, so stop haunting this place!"

There was no sign of the wild dog anywhere.

When Tanda awoke the next morning, it was still dark. Everyone else was still asleep, so Tanda tip-toed quietly out the back door and went up the mountain path toward Torogai's hut. He hadn't gone far before he saw Jiguro and Balsa coming toward him, their dim shapes scarcely illuminated by predawn light.

Tanda waved. "Balsa!"

Balsa and Jiguro turned away from him down a side road, but Balsa hesitated. Jiguro said something that Tanda couldn't quite hear. Balsa looked at Tanda, somewhat apologetically, and shook her head before following Jiguro down the side road.

"Balsa!" Tanda put his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice. "Balsa!"

Balsa didn't turn back to look at him this time. Tanda tried to catch up, but they were too fast, and were eventually lost in the shadow of the trees.

the gambler

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds in the late summer sky. The wind blowing through the open window was unseasonably cold and harsh, though the afternoon had been cloyingly hot.

Balsa sat near the window in the tavern, watching a flock of birds make their way across the reddening expanse of sky. The shadows of the birds looked like dark threads woven in a tapestry for contrast. The tavern closed once every ten days to give the people who worked there a rest, so there were no customers here today. The only people Balsa saw were two sets of gamblers rolling dice, competing in games of susutto.

The waiters in the tavern had gone home last night so that they could spend some time with their families before returning early to prepare for tomorrow's reopening. Balsa would have liked to return home to her family sometimes, too, but she couldn't. She'd fled from her homeland when she was six years old. It had been seven years since she'd last walked through her own front door. Balsa and her foster father, Jiguro, had been wanderers for that entire time, living and working among strangers in strange lands. That was the only kind of life that Balsa could remember.

Balsa looked up at the darkening sky through the window, feeling deeply lonely. *I wonder when dad will come back...*

Jiguro's spear was in bad repair and needed a new point. He'd gone to the swordsmith's that afternoon and hadn't returned yet. Balsa suspected that he'd passed a bookstore. He didn't look it, but Jiguro was an extremely bookish man, and rare old books were a particular weakness of his.

Jiguro guarded the tavern on days when it was open, standing grimly in one corner and refusing to drink or converse with any of the drunken clientele. But on rest days, he would usually go out into the village to buy supplies—and books. Balsa thought that he looked like a completely different person when he was reading. He reminded her very much of her real father—the one she'd lost long ago. He used to read a lot, too.

Balsa knew that her father was never a warrior like Jiguro. When she remembered him now, she thought that he must have been some kind of scholar or researcher; that was the kind of personality he had. He'd read her stories every night before she went to sleep. Jiguro had told her that he was a doctor—the physician to the King of Kanbal. But he'd gotten embroiled in a scheme to assassinate the king using poison. The King of Kanbal's brother, Rogsam, had ordered him killed.

Balsa's father, Karuna, and Jiguro had been best friends. Karuna had begged Jiguro to save Balsa, who was only five years old at the time, from being killed. Jiguro had honored his friend's last wish, defied Rogsam and left Kanbal with Balsa. They hadn't returned since.

Jiguro and Balsa were the same. He didn't have a home to return to, either.

Balsa heard cheering behind her and turned around. It seemed that the susutto match was over. She left the window and headed over to the gamblers. She'd heard rumors that gamblers successful enough to make a name for themselves stayed at this tavern sometimes, but she wasn't acquainted with many of the regulars. She understood gambling primarily in the context of battle, since there was a clear winner and loser.

Balsa knew how to play susutto: she'd learned at a different tavern that Jiguro had worked at the year before. Susutto was the most popular game of chance in Rota. Balsa considered the game very underhanded, since the easiest way to win was through manipulating the dice. Many people in this region played it, including fully half of the local lords and government officials. Important contracts and even war negotiations were conducted through games of susutto.

Unlike tarzu, which was played with pieces shaped into horses, warriors and kings, susutto was played primarily with dice. Rolling a 1 was the best: its rank corresponded to a king in tarzu and meant that the king could move. Rolling a 2 corresponded to a soldier's rank, and so on. The two players would each roll a die and maneuver their pieces based on which ones were allowed to move. The winner of the round received a point in a tally log.

The game was simple to play, but not so simple to win. Losing a round usually meant that the player had to give up something—money, typically, or land, or titles. The guests of the tavern schemed to come up with ways to get some of the money of the local lords for themselves.

Moneychangers hovered at the sides of every game, ready to swoop in and offer a favorable exchange rate into any currency the player might desire. It was easy to for a moneychanger to make their living in a place like this, where money flowed as fast as easily as water.

There were susutto tournaments in Rota, but this tavern was known for a variant of the game called tai susutto, meaning "short susutto." The games were quick, sudden elimination matches where a winner could be decided in an evening, not the more elaborate games designed for longer tournament settings. Nobles and the royal family of Rota played rotoi susutto, "long susutto," which was the tournament style of the game.

Long susutto was not limited to tournaments. People played for years at a time, recording victories and losses on lengthy scrolls of parchment. Some long susutto games went on for so long that they became historical records, used to map relations between people and families over long periods of time.

Balsa was exceptionally good at susutto. Her physical training with Jiguro had given her very precise control over her own movements, which extended even to the tips of her fingers. Changing which way a die would fall came as naturally as breathing to her.

The first time Balsa played susutto, she'd become so completely absorbed in the game that she hadn't quit before winning three weeks' worth of wages from the waiters in the tavern where she and Jiguro had been staying. She knew at the time that she should have stopped, but the high she got from winning was too intoxicating, too powerful. She couldn't stop, even when she tried.

Balsa still remembered that night with special affection. She'd rarely ever been so happy in her entire life.

But then....she'd lost.

Lost more than double what she'd won. She had come out of the tavern that night in so much debt that it would take her and Jiguro fifty days to work it off in the tavern.

Jiguro had refused to help her. She'd made her own bed, and had to lie in it. But she hadn't known how she was supposed to resolve this situation without his help.

"You gambled with money you didn't have," Jiguro said gruffly. "The world has decided to teach you a harsh lesson."

Balsa had learned that lesson well. She was no longer so interested in winning that she lost track of everything else. When she played susutto now, she kept an eye on the time. If she started winning, she quit, and if she started losing, she also quit. It was better to cut her losses and run than to risk getting in too deep again. She understood now that gamblers who won big money one day could easily lose it all —and then some—the next.

Susutto was an easy, addictive game. Balsa had trained herself to resist the allure of winning too much.

The gambler Lahura was a professional when it came to self-restraint. Lahura had been a gambler for many years and specialized in susutto. She understood even better than Balsa that gambling had consequences, and took the long-term view in her playing style. Balsa would learn the fundamentals of her own self-restraint by watching her.

Jiguro was pleased at Balsa's progress, both at understanding gambling and at working off her debt. She and Jiguro were stuck in place until she'd paid back every last coin. That had been hard for Balsa to stomach at the time, but now, she was grateful for the experience… though she still wasn't done working off her debt.

There was another cheer from the gambling table. It looked like someone had just won a lot of money. There were several young men and women observing the game in progress. The chill breeze from the window blew in and ruffled their hair and clothes. There were four people competing at the table tonight. Many people from the village had come to watch them play. Balsa heard some of the young men shout to encourage their friends, who seemed to be winning at the moment.

One of the young men was better-dressed than the others, with a decorated collar and clothes made from high-quality material. The color of his overshirt was flashy and had a silk shine. Balsa guessed that he was the son of some famous merchant in the area. He was probably a sponsor of this contest; he certainly seemed to have a very keen interest in who was winning. A shorter, slimmer man stood next to him, also absorbed in the game. Despite the discrepancy in physical size, the two men had very similar facial features. Balsa guessed that they were brothers.

The shorter man poked the taller man in his shoulder, calling his name. He whispered something in his ear.

The only competitor that Balsa knew well was Arl. He was the second son of a local farming family that often supplied the tavern with chicken. He was madly in love with Mana, one of the waitresses who lived on the second floor of the tavern. Mana and Balsa usually slept in the same room. Mana liked Arl, too, and she especially enjoyed gossiping to Balsa about their burgeoning romance.

Arl had won many local susutto competitions before, but Balsa didn't consider him her rival. She didn't share Mana's rosy opinion of him, for one—and she believed that he was a bit too full of himself to really be a serious competitor, for another. He was puffing out his chest now, but the moment he started to lose, he'd deflate. He was a terrible loser and took his losses far too personally. Arl wasn't a gambler by profession, or even by inclination, really; susutto was something he did in his spare time.

Arl had a nice laugh and was fun to be around as long as he was winning, but Balsa didn't really understand why Mana liked him so much.

Balsa observed the competition with casual interest. A few rounds passed without much change, but then Arl went as white as a sheet. He'd lost—and lost a lot, judging by the look on his face.

I guess he can't afford a ring for Mana now, Balsa thought. He'd bragged all morning about buying her a fancy gold ring if he won today. Balsa sighed inwardly. *How stupid.*

Lahura was Arl's opponent tonight. She wore a red good-luck charm around her neck. Balsa expected that Lahura had seen Arl's dejected and lovesick expression countless times before on many different faces.

Lahura had something of a local reputation because of her long career as a gambler. Those who had never seen her and only knew her name through stories might assume that the rumored Lahura was a young man in the prime of life who won his matches and tournaments by intimidating or outwitting opponents, but Lahura's appearance did not match her reputation in any way. She was an effete, small-boned, seventy-year-old woman.

Lahura seemed genuinely concerned by Arl's loss. She sat across the table, staring. It was Arl's turn to roll.

"Oi! It's your turn!" someone in the crowd shouted. "Keep going!"

Arl looked around the room with an expression of deep concentration. He didn't want to roll again: that much was clear. His eyes lit on Balsa, who was standing behind a support beam near a wall.

"Hi, Balsa!" Arl waved. "I'm glad you're here! Can you come over by me?"

Balsa wanted to ignore him, but he looked so hopeful, and there was something in his tone that sounded desperate. She pushed her way through the spectators standing around Arl and Lahura.

"I'm really up against it here," Arl said to Balsa. "Will you help me? Please?"

Balsa wasn't sure what she was being asked to do. Arl grabbed her wrist and put it over his die. "I have no luck against Lahura," he said. "Roll for me! That's fine, Zukan, right? I'll pay you more if you let her roll."

Some of the men watching broke into raucous laughter. "Oi, what's wrong with you, huh? Lost your nerve?"

"Getting a little girl to roll for you? Pathetic."

Zukan was the tall man who looked like a rich merchant's son. He laughed with the others, then sat down in a chair at the gambling table. The chair squeaked as he settled his bulk into it.

"You there, girl. How old are you?"

"Thirteen," Balsa said.

Zukan laughed again, and the room laughed with him—but the sound was more threatening than jovial. Arl's hand, still wrapped around Balsa's wrist, started trembling slightly.

"And how much extra are you prepared to wager?" Zukan asked Arl.

The sum Arl named sounded astronomically huge to Balsa. His voice was barely louder than a whisper. Balsa guessed that he wasn't about to leave the table until he'd won enough back to buy Mana the ring he'd promised her.

Balsa didn't like to admit it, not even to herself, but she felt sorry for Arl. And she was a little angry at Zukan for underestimating her. She faced Zukan and said, "What's wrong? Are you afraid to let a little girl play? Maybe you think I'll upstage you or the other gamblers, hm?"

Zukan was still smiling, but his smile no longer reached his eyes. The chair under him creaked as he stood up. "Don't go picking any fights, missy. It's fine. I'll let you play in Arl's place, and I'll play against you myself. If you don't win, I guess I can always sell you to pay off his debt."

Balsa didn't let Zukan's empty threat rattle her. She pulled up a chair and waited for her turn to play susutto. She was grateful not to

have Lahura as an opponent, but Zukan. She was angry at Zukan and excited to be playing again. She always felt warm all over when she was about to win. Winning at susutto warmed her from within, though she was more careful now than she used to be and didn't let the game go to her head.

Arl had lost over half his soldier tokens. The ones that remained guarded the bridge that led to his king. If Balsa lost those, the game was as good as over...she'd only create more debt for Arl.

This was a crisis. Zukan was a deeply unpleasant man, and he'd already made a threat about owning her. She knew that he owned a third of this province's land, and she wasn't about to let him acquire anything else.

Balsa scanned the record of the game so far. Some of the moves looked a bit strange to her, and some seemed downright impossible. This log extended back several days and listed the moves of several competitors. Balsa strongly suspected that Zukan was altering the log to make the games look more favorable to the people he was betting on.

He's rigging the games.

Balsa bit her lip. It would be hard to prove from this book alone, but Balsa was convinced that Zukan was cheating somehow. She could do nothing without definitive proof, so she turned her attention back to the game.

Lahura was a strange woman. Though she was a very successful gambler, she'd never bought any land for herself, nor did she want to govern any part of the territory. She lived as a wanderer, riding the same kind of horse that traveling merchants and artists often chose to

use. When she was in need of money, she smuggled common goods like food and medicine and sold them to people in dire straits because of war or famine. That was how she made her money, apart from gambling. But Lahura was getting old, and couldn't ride nearly as well anymore.

A few times in the past, Lahura had taken large sums of money from Zukan and other lords at gambling, which surprised Balsa. Lahura never seemed all that interested in money or power.

Lahura's expression did not shift. She stared dispassionately down at the game as if it didn't interest her in the slightest. Balsa was scared of ever facing Lahura as an opponent. She tried not to let any fear show on her face.

"Oi! Stop hesitating! Roll already!" Zukan called out in irritation.

Balsa nodded, as much to herself as Zukan, and rolled. She knew at least one strategy that might work in her favor here. She would have to abandon the remaining soldiers Arl had—for now—and focus on attacking Zukan's soldiers, who were on a practically indefensible part of the game board. That was the easiest way to force a path to his king, though the strategy was obviously very risky.

Balsa rolled the die again, focusing on bringing her pieces in range to attack Zukan's. She knew how the die would fall without even looking at it. A hush fell over the tavern as spectators watched with bated breath.

The lord betting on Zukan and the competitors in his employ for this contest started to understand what Balsa was doing at around midnight, but by then, it was too late to prevent Zukan's loss. Balsa

wiped out Arl's debt, and made enough on top of that to buy a whole jug of good sake, too. The lord's proud face was pinched and his tone of voice became obnoxious and irritable.

The contest ended with Balsa's victory. No one clapped, but Balsa heard several heartfelt sighs of relief. The waiters and waitresses of the tavern started arriving to set up the kitchen to serve drinks and meals in the morning, but Jiguro did not return.

I wonder if he heard something about our pursuers, she thought. Sometimes, Jiguro heard troubling news about Kanbal and stayed out longer to investigate the rumors further.

Balsa looked up the staircase of the tavern that led to the second floor with a frown. The only time Jiguro had been out this late before, he'd been following up on a caravan guard job in the village. If he was out trying to find a job, that meant the two of them would be leaving this place soon. The exhilaration of winning for Arl gradually faded as the reality of her situation sunk in. While the King of Kanbal lived, Balsa and Jiguro wouldn't be allowed to live in peace anywhere. Jiguro knew too much about King Rogsam's evil deeds. If their pursuers found them, Balsa didn't expect that they would allow her and Jiguro to live.

Balsa was about to go upstairs to the room she shared with Jiguro when Arl called out to her.

"Hey, Balsa! Wait!" Arl grabbed Balsa's hand and steered her out into the yard behind the tavern. There was a well not far from the door that people used to wash dishes and clothing. It was still dark outside, but Balsa could see Mana standing in the window of the tavern, illuminated by candlelight.

"Thanks so much for stepping in for me," Arl said. "That was an amazing victory." He waved to Mana, who joined them outside. He told Mana all about Balsa's defeat of Zukan in the susutto contest, smiling all the while. Arl's hand came down on Balsa's shoulder and clasped it in a friendly sort of way.

The gate latch creaked: people were preparing to leave the tavern in a long line, now that the tournament was over. Balsa saw Zukan and his entourage in the crowd.

Arl frowned as Zukan and his men came closer. He stepped in front of Mana to protect her, if the need arose. Zukan and the others were shouting drunkenly with their arms linked together. It wasn't clear if doing this helped them maintain their balance or made them more likely to fall: several of the men stumbled as they walked.

A man—Zukan's younger brother—staggered to a halt in front of Balsa. He ran a hand over her chest before she could step back. Balsa's vision went white with rage. She side-stepped the man, breaking his hold on her, and shot her hand out between his legs, putting his more tender parts in a painful visegrip.

The man screamed. Balsa let him go, shoving him hard into a taller man who was standing right behind him. Balsa stepped around the men surrounding her and jumped at Zukan's younger brother.

Zukan's younger brother shifted to face her, eyes wide open in shock. Balsa yanked him down by the hair, pulling his nose directly into her upward palm strike. Zukan's younger brother cried out, though the sound was a bit muffled due to his broken nose.

Balsa hadn't let go of his hair. As blood streamed down his face, she yanked him all the way down onto his back on the ground and pinned his chest using one knee. Her hands pushed down on his shoulders, hard.

Zukan's men tried to pull Balsa off of his little brother, but Balsa refused to let go of the man's head. Whenever they tried to pull her up and off, she slammed the man's head into the ground over and over again, making him scream even more. She was so angry that she didn't fully realize what she was doing, or she might have stopped. Maybe.

Something freezing cold passed over Balsa's back. Her hands stilled. She blinked water out of her eyes and looked around. Someone had thrown a bucket of water from the well over her and the other men fighting to break things up.

"Stop it! Just stop!" Lahura yelled. She was holding the bucket.

Balsa, Zukan, his brother and his men stared at Lahura in shock.

"If you keep beating him like that, you'll kill him," Lahura said.

Balsa blinked, then took a deep breath. Her hands were covered in blood, and so was the face of Zukan's little brother. The man's eyes were open—he was still alive—but only just. Balsa felt herself start shaking.

Lahura placed the warm weight of her hand on Balsa's elbow and helped her stand.

Zukan drew his sword and leveled it at Balsa. "Come here, girl," he said in a tone of command. "Don't think I'll let you live after what you just did."

Lahura gripped Balsa's shoulder. "Mr. Zukan," she said. Her tone was entirely calm. "Your brother touched her first. If you wish revenge

for your lost game of susutto, settle it on the game board. The tavern yard is no place for petty squabbles."

"You old hag," Zukan shot back. "Do you presume to lecture me? If you're as good a gambler as they say, then you should know when you're pushing your luck." Zukan swiped his sword at Lahura in a threatening way, but Lahura stood firm. Her hand was still on Balsa's shoulder.

"I asked her to stop," she said, nodding to Balsa. "I'll ask you, too. Stop this madness before someone gets seriously hurt." Lahura sounded exhausted. "And don't forget what Nakazu will to you if you harm me, young man."

Zukan's men gasped. Nakazu was famous in the province for supporting only top-talent gamblers. He had rank and power equal to one of Rota's clan lords. Lahura was one of the gamblers that Nakazu backed, and his backing came with certain benefits. For all intents and purposes, Lahura was considered Nakazu's investment. If anyone harmed her, Nakazu would extract the appropriate restitution. Susutto —and gambling in general—was no laughing matter in Rota.

If Nakazu was backing Lahura as a gambler, it meant that she was nationally ranked as one of the best gamblers in the entire country.

Zukan stared down Lahura and didn't move.

"You seem to enjoy susutto," Lahura said. "Would you really rather never play it again? That will happen, if you continue to threaten us."

Zukan snorted. "Fine. We'll play again, someday." He gestured for his men to follow him.

Lahura released Balsa's shoulder. Arl rushed up and led Balsa, Lahura and Mana back inside the tavern.

"Can you stay the night?" Mana asked. "I'd feel safer with you here."

Arl shook his head. "I wish I could, but I have to start chores early this morning..."

Lahura led Balsa past Mana and Arl in the common room of the tavern, back toward the susutto tournament tables. Some cholu had been left behind on the tables, and the air was thick with smoke. Lahura invited Balsa to sit down. Balsa pulled a chair up in front of Lahura's table. Lahura nodded, satisfied, and sat down across from her.

Since the waiters had returned, some people had already started ordering food and drink. There was a plate of fried meat on the table, not yet cold. Lahura reached out for a piece of meat.

"You know my name," Lahura said, "don't you?"

"Of course I do," Balsa said. "It's Lahura."

Lahura smiled. "My real name is Azuno. Your real name must be Balsa, for you to react that way. You should be more careful about who you reveal your true name to."

Balsa nodded crisply. Jiguro was always telling her to be more careful.

"I was concerned for you when I heard those men calling your name," Lahura said. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Thank you," Balsa said.

Lahura's hands trembled finely. She held them together to keep them still. "Tell me...how many years have you been playing susutto?"

she asked.

"Uh..." Balsa thought for a moment. "I've been playing for less than a year."

Lahura's eyebrows rose slightly. Her eyes, usually as flat and disinterested as the rest of her expression, took on an uncharacteristic gleam. "Hm..." She looked like she wanted to say more, but she thought better of it.

Someone had rubbed their greasy hands all over the table before Lahura and Balsa had sat down. Lahura wiped down the table with a clean napkin, then stood up and stretched extravagantly. "What a night," she said. "It's about time we both got some sleep."

Balsa stood up. She was still right on the edge of anger at being assaulted, but she was too tired to maintain vigilance over herself for much longer.

"Miss Lahura—I mean, Azuno," Balsa said.

Azuno was in the doorway, heading for the next room. She turned around when Balsa called out to her. "Yes?"

"Are you going to be staying here for a while?" Balsa asked.

"I really can't say," Lahura said, resting her hand on the doorframe. "I usually stay here for two months out of the year. It's a little embarrassing, but at my age, it's hard to just pick up and travel as much as I want anymore."

Jiguro finally returned from having his spear repaired. He brought the spear's point very close to Balsa's face, surprising her. Balsa blinked, but she didn't flinch or step back. She crossed her spear with Jiguro's, putting her full weight into the strike. Jiguro's repaired weapon felt solid. The new point didn't wobble in the slightest.

It was just past dawn, and the first red light of the sun shone off the points of their spears onto their faces. Balsa smelled the distinctive scent of newly work ed metal.

"Again," Jiguro commanded inflexibly in the same tone as a cracking whip.

Balsa gritted her teeth and braced herself for Jiguro's next blow. Sparks flew as metal struck metal. His spear had slid along her grip partway as it landed, which likely wasn't intentional. Perhaps the weight of the new spear point was different from the old one.

Balsa managed to hold her ground. Jiguro's spear started sliding and kept moving, rebuffed by Balsa's strong defense.

I did it! she thought. She had stopped Jiguro's spear successfully, but Jiguro didn't allow her so much as a single moment of complacency. The pressure of the spear pushing against hers vanished. Jiguro reversed his grip and attacked from an unexpected angle.

Balsa blocked, but she lost her footing and went toppling backwards. Her body felt slow, like it was moving through water.

Jiguro aimed the point of his spear at Balsa's chest. She felt it stop just shy of piercing her skin. Balsa twisted, folding her arms, and caught the tip of the spear on her metal wrist guards. The clang of the spear's point against her armguards was shrill enough to hurt her ears.

The spear hadn't cut her, but catching the blow on her arms sent a shock wave running through Balsa's entire body. Though her arms were occupied, Balsa had remembered to hold on to her own spear with her left hand. She glanced to the left and side-stepped around Jiguro to put herself in a better defensive position. She grunted as she moved, gathering strength in her arms, and took another leaping step to the left.

Balsa slipped when she landed. The shaft of Jiguro's spear came down hard in the gap between her neck and shoulder. Balsa collapsed to one knee, gasping.

"How many times have I told you: protect your head!" Jiguro thundered at her from above. "Your footing won't matter if the enemy slits your throat!"

Balsa got her breathing under control and stared up at Jiguro. She stood up slowly.

Jiguro had first crossed spears with Balsa near the well outside the tavern. She'd thought that she had plenty of space to move between the tavern and the well, but she'd forgotten about all the buckets and ropes in the way. She'd lost her footing after landing from her leap because she'd tripped over a bucket. In a real battle, even a small stone on the field could make a warrior trip and fall, leading to their deaths.

"Catch!" Jiguro called out, startling Balsa. He launched her own spear at her, which had fallen at the same time she had. She caught her spear just in time to duck under Jiguro's next high strike to her head. Jiguro faced her squarely, so that she had to use both hands on her spear and bend her knees to prevent the strength of his blows from knocking her down.

Her spear shook from the strength of Jiguro's hits, vibrating in her hands. The next strike came from above, then below, then from the side…Balsa caught each one on her spear before it could land on her, but her hands were going numb and her arms felt like rubber.

At long last, Jiguro stopped attacking. Balsa let herself fall to the ground, completely exhausted. She tried to get up, but her knees shook too violently. Her legs wouldn't support her own weight.

Jiguro approached her, and his manner was still threatening. She'd hoped for a break from training, now that she was too weak to stand, but it seemed that Jiguro wasn't done with her yet.

"You became unbalanced when you let go of the spear with your right hand and relied only on your left side to protect yourself," Jiguro said.

Balsa nodded, but did not trust herself to speak. She felt like the earth was spinning slowly around her.

Jiguro walked away from her, toward the well. Balsa heard him call out to someone in greeting. Azuno was outside, standing under the eaves of the tavern near a barrel of wine. She came closer to Balsa, waving.

"Seems like you've been busy," Azuno said. She picked up Balsa's spear, but she nearly dropped it before she could get a proper grip on it. "It's so heavy!" Azuno said. "From the way you swung it around, I thought it was much lighter."

Azuno passed the spear to Balsa, who used it to support herself so that she could sit up.

"Do you do this every morning?" Azuno asked.

Balsa nodded. Azuno appeared shocked. "I'm impressed," Azuno said. "At your bravery, and his ferocity. I hope he only puts you through such training for a good reason."

Balsa was only thirteen. Receiving martial training of the kind that Balsa did every day was rare for anyone her age, male or female. But Azuno seemed less surprised by the training itself and more surprised by the ferocity of it.

After passing Balsa her spear, Azuno turned around and went back inside the tavern.

Azuno was a guest of honor at this particular tavern. Whenever she visited for susutto competitions, she stayed in a lavishly appointed room on the first floor. Gambling was her profession, so she usually awoke at sunset, worked all night and went to sleep at dawn. She usually got up to eat something at lunch, then took another nap until it was time for her to work.

The tavern's workers took care of things like cooking, cleaning, and drawing water. When they finished their morning chores, they had lunch and took naps, too, in preparation for the evening shift. Mana and the other waitresses woke up long before Azuno to make themselves presentable, doing up their hair and powdering their faces.

Balsa had no interest in makeup or cosmetics of any kind. She often spent the wee hours of the morning in Azuno's room, watching her play

susutto against herself. Azuno never minded the company. She invited Balsa to sit down at a low table next to her and watch.

Sometimes, Azuno played against Balsa, though they never played for money. Azuno taught Balsa how to manipulate the die so that it would land how she wanted.

Azuno's hands were ancient, wrinkled, thin, and covered in age spots. The movements of her fingers were not obviously deft or quick, but she knew the way to curl her fingertips around a die and exert the perfect amount of pressure before she released it. She always held the die between two fingers, for greater stability, before letting it go. Her movements were as varied as practice patterns with the spear. Balsa was fascinated by them and became obsessed with copying her until she got a move exactly right.

"Excellent! You're a natural!" Azuno always praised Balsa effusively when she mastered a new technique. "Now, try it with two at once. Here."

Azuno passed Balsa another die. Balsa rolled both at once, using the technique she'd just learned to make them fall the way she wanted. One die landed correctly, but the other die landed on a different number than she'd expected.

Azuno smiled gently. "Every die is not the same. They vary by weight and shape. Even if they look exactly the same, there will usually be some small difference. You must learn a die's characteristics by touch, and do it quickly, if you expect to win."

Balsa nodded in understanding. "Did you ever lose that way? By not understanding a die?"

"I have," Azuno said, "and I do. I've even lost here, once, in this very tavern."

"What did you do then?" Balsa asked. "I've never heard about you losing before, so you can't have lost very much, right?"

Azuno reached for a small, sweet chiku fruit that was sitting on a tray at her side. "I suppose that's true," she said. She popped the fruit in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "I have lost before—small sums of money, here and there—but I've heard people say that Lahura never loses."

"It's not true, though," Balsa said.

"No," Azuno said. "But it is useful. My reputation precedes me. People assume that I can't lose, and so, I rarely do. If you had a reputation like that, wouldn't you use it to your best advantage?" She smiled. "If you can't lie at least a little, you can't gamble. There's no real trick to playing. All you need is experience at it. The more experience you have, the more natural winning looks, until people start to think that you can't lose."

Azuno picked up another chiku fruit. She spat the seed of the first one she'd eaten into a napkin, then returned her attention to Balsa. "Shall I teach you to be like Lahura? The gambler that never loses?"

Balsa nodded rapidly. "Please teach me."

Azuno leaned close to Balsa and whispered, "There's only one thing you really need to know to be a successful gambler: how to run away."

Balsa frowned. "So...what? Never be too comfortable in your seat? Always be ready to get up and move in case you lose?"

Azuno's smile was patient. "You're thinking of 'run away' in a literal sense. That's not what I mean." She leaned back a little, lost in thought. She wasn't smiling anymore. "I'm not sure you can learn it. Fleeing from danger doesn't suit your personality. Maybe you'll understand better when you get to be my age."

Early morning sunlight danced through the window near them, warming their faces. The tavern was so quiet and still around them that it was hard to believe that anyone worked there. The floor had been wiped clean of footprints and the hallways and tables were immaculately clean. Balsa had never felt the tavern's emptiness in quite the same way before.

Sometimes, Azuno talked to herself while she was playing susutto, especially long susutto. She kept a tally log on parchment and kept score against herself. It was like she was trying enter the minds of other, imagined competitors. The game had gone on for so long that she needed several sheets of parchment to tally it all up. She went back through her tally log one day and realized that more than fifty years had passed since she'd started this particular game.

"Have you played against yourself for all this time?" Balsa asked, looking at the logs over Azuno's shoulder.

Azuno lifted her face from the parchment in surprise. She'd almost forgotten that Balsa was there.

Azuno shook her head. "I began it when I was by myself, but I had opponents here—and here—and here." Her fingers trailed over the old parchment, pointing out losses and wins. Her lips twitched upward in a wistful smile.

"How long have you played this game?" Balsa asked.

"A very, very long time." Azuno answered Balsa without looking up from the parchment. "I never played for money: not with this game. So many tricks...such unexpected kindness...there are different ways to win and lose, too." She sighed. "My parents died when I was twelve years old. My uncle Lahura took me in after that, but he died when I was only sixteen. I decided that I would live as Lahura from that point on...living the life that he should have had himself. I started playing this game with him. It's the last susutto game he ever got to play. As long as it never ends, it's like some part of him is still alive."

The last recorded date on the parchment she read was from two years before. "It's about time that I continued this game, don't you think?" she asked. "I thought I'd finish it before, you know, but my opponents either got ill and retired—or died—or they had to move away. Maybe I'll finally finish it, this time."

Azuno's strategy in the game was somewhat unusual. Balsa knew from watching Azuno in other games that her play style typically resembled the way she lived: she used the game's cavalry forces, including the king and queen's horses, to keep her pieces mobile and swift on the battlefield.

But that was Azuno's usual strategy. Her strategy in this decades-long game of susutto was much more straightforward and clear-cut. She used her king to carry out many moves instead of her soldiers or

generals, which was customary. It was like she wanted to win honorably, or not at all.

"Try to imagine what you'd do if the die fell this way," Azuno said. "Or like this. Sometimes, it's best to defend, and wait for your opening to attack." Azuno spoke quietly, demonstrating possible outcomes with the die without actually making any moves herself. To Balsa, listening to her speak was more like hearing a story than learning how to play a game.

The territory of Rota where Balsa and Jiguro were staying was governed by a northern clan lord named Radam. A messenger of Lord Radam's chief supporter, Takanu, came to the tavern about three weeks after Azuno had first arrived there.

The messenger looked like a warrior: he was tall, broad-shouldered, and moved with exaggerated care indoors, like he was afraid to break something on accident. He was an older man, though it was difficult to tell how old. He recognized Azuno almost immediately and greeted her with a broad smile.

"Is that Azuno I see? You never age at all!"

Azuno rose from her seat and bowed deeply. "You never change, either, Yazam. You're looking well. How is Lord Takanu?"

"He was ill a little while back, but he's recovered. His leg still gives him trouble at times."

"Still?" Azuno looked somewhat concerned. Lord Takanu had fallen from a horse many years before, and his leg hadn't been quite right since.

"Yes. Sadly, though he suffered the injury in his youth, he has never recovered. He may well have to live with it for the rest of his life. He can no longer walk around outside, which vexes him. He heard that you were in town and sent me to you immediately."

"Really?" Azuno bowed her head. "He is considerate. Please thank him for always treating me with such warmth and kindness."

Yazam grinned. "You're selling yourself short as always, Lahura. You're an extraordinary player—haven't you been playing a game of long susutto for more than fifty years? I've never heard of anyone else trying that. Lord Takanu will be at his residence tonight. Will you consider making a visit?"

"Of course I will," Azuno said.

Balsa approached the table where Yazam and Azuno were sitting, carrying a tray of chilled fruit juice. She was helping the tavern owner and the waitresses with their work today. She placed the tray on their table, bowed, and started walking away.

Azuno called Balsa back. "Balsa, can you stay here with me for a moment?"

Balsa walked back to the table and stood next to Azuno. Azuno placed her hand on Balsa's shoulder, then said, "Yazam, I would like to bring this girl with me tonight. She has quite a knack for games of chance, and I believe that watching me play would be both beneficial and enjoyable for her."

Yazam gave Balsa a once-over, but he didn't seem at all opposed to letting her accompany Azuno. "Do as you like," Yazam said. "She will be welcome, along with you."

"Thank you very much," Azuno said. She bowed her head to Yazam again, then faced Balsa. "I'd like you to see this. I'll be continuing my game of long susutto tonight."

"But—doesn't he serve a clan lord?" Balsa asked, looking toward Yazam. "Are you really going to play against someone like that, Azuno?" Balsa wasn't sure what to make of Yazam. He spoke politely enough, but she could easily tell that he was a warrior at first glance. And Azuno had never received visits from Rotan clan lords or their retainers before.

Azuno nodded gravely. Her game of long susutto had continued in an unbroken line for more than fifty years. Of course Balsa wanted to see her continue it. She was so excited that it didn't seem real, but like a scene in a story.

Then Balsa remembered that she wasn't free to go anywhere that night. "I'm sorry. I can't go," she said. "It's a workday today, and I—"

Azuno and Yazam exchanged smiles.

"This is a rare opportunity to observe Lord Takanu and Lahura play long susutto," Yazam said in a resonant tone. "Ask the tavern keeper. I'm sure he would give you a night off."

Yazam proved correct: the tavern keeper granted Balsa the evening off of work easily. The tavern keeper didn't mind her going with Azuno, but he wasn't the only one Balsa was worried about. If she went to a clan lord's castle, she might be forced to stay overnight out of politeness, since she would be accompanying Azuno, who was an honored guest. And she and Jiguro were fugitives from Kanbal. It was possible that a Kanbalese lord or one of their pursuers would be at Lord Takanu's castle. She couldn't even think about going there without talking to Jiguro first.

Balsa found Jiguro sharpening his spear with a whetstone, sitting near the tavern's well. She told him about Lord Takanu's invitation in a voice barely louder than a whisper, eyes cast down.

Jiguro wiped excess moisture off his spear point with a rag, then said, "Is that so? Sounds like a rare opportunity indeed. Go on, then, and have fun."

Balsa looked up at Jiguro, surprised. She'd expected him to say no. "Is it really all right for me to go to the castle of a clan lord's main supporter?" she asked. "Isn't it dangerous?"

Jiguro didn't smile, but his eyes were laughing at her. "Lord Radam doesn't have dealings with King Rogsam. He never has, to my knowledge. And I haven't heard about any other Kanbalese warriors in the area except for us. You should always be careful, but I think you'll be safe enough."

"But..."

Jiguro stood up and rested a heavy hand on Balsa's head. "Stop worrying so much," he said. "It's not every day that you get to see

someone of Lahura's caliber play."

Lord Takanu's castle came into view in the distance. The sight of it made Balsa catch her breath.

This is just a retainer's castle, not a clan lord's? It's ginormous!

Balsa's father had once taken her to the the Yonsa Clan's castle when she was a very young child. She could barely remember that. To her, this castle appeared to be far larger than any building she'd ever seen in Kanbal. Kanbal's buildings were also constructed out of the dark gray gut-rock of the mountain, as a rule, but this castle's walls gleamed in the light of the setting sun with a mirror shine.

The guard on the gate was a young man who didn't recognize Azuno. Azuno said a few words to him, and he let them pass into a garden dotted with large, mosquito-repelling fires that belched smoke into the air. Azuno led Balsa along the garden path and found the back door without any trouble. She'd been to this place many times before.

An old matron dressed as a maid greeted Azuno with a fond smile. "It's been ages since you've come! How have you been?"

Azuno made polite replies while the maid led them into the kitchen. The maid insisted that Azuno and Balsa sit and have a meal before playing. There was a large bird roasting over an open fire in the kitchen. It was well-basted and dripping with juices. Balsa ate too much without realizing it, but no one seemed to mind.

After dinner, a messenger from Lord Takanu came and led Azuno and Balsa to Lord Takanu's personal chambers. The hallways were made of the same polished stone as the castle walls. The temperature was pleasantly cool, but not cold. The castle must surely house a lot of people, but Balsa didn't hear many, and the hallways were surprisingly quiet. She guessed that people must have plenty of space to move around here, unlike the crowded, noisy tavern where she and Jiguro lived and worked. The castle felt strangely comforting to her: quiet and safe.

Balsa was a bit surprised that she and Azuno had been summoned to the lord's personal living space instead of a receiving hall or a banquet area. The room he greeted them in was quite large. A window on the western wall let in the early evening air. A man sat in a chair with his arms settled on the armrests, supporting his face with one hand.

The man's eyes lit up when Azuno entered the room. "There you are, Azuno! I was getting impatient."

Balsa felt a sudden surge of tension from Azuno. Azuno's shoulders tensed up briefly, then relaxed. Lord Takanu spoke in a hearty tone and looked hale and well. Balsa had heard from Yazam that his leg was bad, but there was no trace of pain or weakness in his voice. If this was what he was like now...well, Balsa imagined that he must have been uncommonly strong as a young man, before his fall from a horse.

Azuno knelt down on the room's carpet before Lord Takanu, bringing her forehead to the floor. "At long last, we see one another again. I thank you for your greeting from the bottom of my heart."

Lord Takanu chuckled. "Now, now, raise your head. Surely we don't need so much formality between us."

Azuno kept her face cast down, but she smiled. "I'm embarrassed to have you see me this way, aged and wrinkled as I am."

"What are you talking about? You appear unchanged to me. Let's not make this a contest over who's suffered the most in their old age."

Azuno sat up and introduced Balsa, then sat in a chair across from Lord Takanu. Balsa sat in a slightly lower chair at Azuno's side. The difference in status between Lord Takanu and Azuno was vast, but there was no awkwardness in their conversation. They spoke to one another in the same way as old friends. It was hard to believe that Azuno had been so nervous when she'd first entered the room.

Lord Takanu and Azuno talked for a long time without playing any susutto. Balsa grew bored of listening to their tedious pleasantries. When is the game going to start?

The conversation dragged on. Balsa thought she might fall asleep before anything actually happened, but fortunately, she was wrong.

A knock at the door restored Balsa's focus. Lord Takanu gave his permission for the man at the door to enter. The man was unfamiliar, young, and very tall. The light of intelligence dance in his eyes. He was smartly dressed and combed for his audience with Lord Takanu.

Azuno bowed deeply to the newcomer. "Ah, Lord Salom! Look how much you've grown!"

Lord Salom blushed faintly, discomfited by Azuno's casual words. She spoke to him as if he were a familiar child. Lord Salom came closer to Lord Takanu and stood by his chair.

Lord Takanu patted Lord Salom on the back. "My grandson certainly has grown up, and he has very good prospects for the future.

He is skilled in both governance in warfare, but he hasn't yet surpassed me at susutto. I thought to invite him to this game. Is that all right?"

"Certainly," Azuno said. "I look forward to seeing you play, Lord Salom."

Lord Takanu smiled, then said hoarsely, "This may be the last time I play against you in this game of long susutto, I think. Has it really been more than fifty years since the start of it? If I don't ever get to play it again, I would ask that you allow my grandson to take my place at the competitor's table."

At long last, Azuno unfurled her long scroll of parchment, briefly recounting the long game up until this point in time. Lord Takanu picked up his die, as did Lord Salom. Azuno clutched hers between two fingers. The game was about to begin.

Lord Salom observed his grandfather silently, but his eyes never stopped moving. He was like a fish darting between reeds, searching for opportunities in the game that would allow for a win.

Balsa stood behind Azuno and observed all three competitors. After a few rounds, Azuno and Lord Takanu really started to compete, and Lord Salom got swept up in the fierceness of their moves. Balsa thought the atmosphere of the game was like spear fighting, with each competitor striking a blow or stopping one at every turn.

Balsa had never seen a susutto game quite like this one before. They weren't playing for money, but even if they were, she suspected it would make no difference. All three of them were experienced players who made their moves confidently without a scrap of hesitation. There was no clear frontrunner for the first several rounds.

But then, Lord Takanu began to falter. Maybe he was tired. During his long conversation with Azuno, he'd said that he hadn't played long susutto in a long time. But even when he started falling behind in the tally logs, he refused to give up.

Balsa had underestimated Salom at the start. He was smart, just like he looked, and if he was less confident than his more seasoned elders, that didn't mean he lacked anything in terms of focus or resolve. Balsa tried to predict his moves and was repeatedly surprised by his choices.

Azuno, too, was full of surprises. Her attack pattern was flawless. Balsa saw a few minor weaknesses, which Salom in particular tried to exploit. But Azuno saw her own weaknesses clearly, and permitted no gaps to open in her defense. Balsa had never seen her adopt such an aggressive strategy before. If this were an actual battle, Azuno would be winning, hands down.

Balsa lost track of time. When Lord Takanu finally called the competition over for the evening, Balsa almost jumped out of her skin. She felt like she'd been observing from the bottom of a river, in a place without distraction or sound. Hearing Lord Takanu's voice made her feel like her head was breaking the surface of the water. Sounds, smells and other distractions started making themselves known again.

Lord Salom had been taciturn for most of the night. He didn't speak now, but it was clear from the look in his eyes that he was keenly interested in the game, and in Azuno as an opponent.

Lord Takanu leaned back in his chair. He looked exhausted. "A splendid game," he said. "You haven't lost your touch at all, Lahura."

Azuno blushed a little and grinned from ear to ear. "I thank you very much for saying so. But I'm afraid we've been up all night...I forgot to give due consideration to your health, Lord Takanu. Please forgive me."

Lord Takanu waved his hand dismissively. "I wouldn't have invited you to play if I cared about such a trivial thing." His eyes shone with mirth. Though he was tired, Balsa thought he looked much younger than he had when he'd first greeted them, as if the excitement of the game had given him a short burst of the energy of his youth.

"Games of long susutto like this are only possible with you," Lord Takanu said. "Wouldn't it be better to open them to the public to see? Or perhaps wager money to make things even more interesting?"

Azuno gaped in shock. She'd never played this game of long susutto for money, and she'd never accepted a public audience for it, either. But she was not at liberty to refuse the recommendation of Lord Takanu. "I, uh...if you desire these things, Lord Takanu, then we can certainly arrange something along those lines."

Lord Takanu nodded along to her words, seeming pleased by his own suggestion and Azuno's acquiescence. "Perfect! Let's do it tomorrow. I can have everything arranged by tomorrow evening. We'll hold it in the grand receiving hall, so there will be plenty of room for spectators. How does that sound?"

Lord Takanu sounded eager and anticipatory. Azuno bowed low to the ground. "Please feel free to make the preparations," she said.

Lord Takanu looked to his grandson. "Are you free tomorrow, to participate?" he asked.

Lord Salom glanced between Azuno and his grandfather, then nodded. He excused himself, bowed, and left the room.

Azuno also bowed and excused herself, but Lord Takanu called her back. "I have a favor to ask," he said.

"Oh?" Azuno said, turning back to face him. She was standing in the doorway with Balsa behind her.

"At tomorrow's game...please let Salom win. For me."

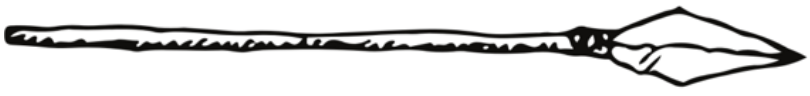
Azuno flushed faintly pink. She held Lord Takanu's gaze, tilting her head in confusion.

"He is still young, but he's tasted his share of success and failure. For him to win against the famous Lahura would do much to burnish his reputation. I want him to have this accomplishment to his name. I'm sure you understand."

Azuno's lips trembled slightly. She cast her eyes down and refused to look at Lord Takanu or Balsa. "I sincerely thank you for everything you have done for me, Lord Takanu." She took a deep breath, then raised her head.

"I will try my very best to do as you ask, but there is always some amount of chance involved," she said. "I cannot promise to lose."

Lord Takanu smiled. "I shall trust in your skill, Lahura."



Azuno walked along the village path in the predawn light with faltering steps. Balsa walked beside her in silence. Azuno's mood

forbade speech. Lord Takanu's retainers had sent them back to the village's main gate, but they had to walk back to the tavern themselves.

Azuno's sighed deeply when the lord's retainers were finally out of sight.

Balsa couldn't restrain her curiosity any longer and asked, "Why would he say something like that to you? It's not fair, having you lose for the sake of his grandson. Does he make you do stuff like that a lot?"

At first, it seemed like Azuno didn't hear Balsa's question. She kept walking, eyes straight ahead. Then she stopped moving and shook her head. "No. He's never asked me to do anything like that before."

"But then..."

Azuno shrugged. "Lord Takanu was a warrior in his youth, before his injury. He applies the strategies of warfare to long susutto because that's all he knows, and all he can really do. He's never even seen a game of short susutto, like the kind we play at the tavern. He's not aware of all the factors that go into winning the shorter games." She lifted the lamp she held a bit higher so that she could see better, then resumed walking. Her feet dragged a little on the dirt path.

"Lord Takanu asked me for a favor," Azuno said. "I've served as a gambler under his patronage for more than fifty years. This is the price I have to pay." Her voice was quiet. Balsa couldn't see her face well, but it sounded like she was crying.

"That's right," Balsa said. "And you've been winning for him for fifty years. Why not win again? It would be what everyone expects."

Azuno said nothing in reply.

"I know he's powerful," Balsa said in an encouraging tone. "But you're way better than him at gambling. He fell for all of your surprise attacks, and that Lord Salom guy is even worse. You can use the obvious disparity in skill as an excuse. Nobody would blame you."

Azuno looked back at Balsa. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she didn't. She turned away and continued walking back toward the tavern.

That night, Azuno visited the tavern keeper in his private rooms. She didn't come out for a long time. Balsa started getting worried. What could they possibly be talking about? She stood near the tavern keeper's door, waiting for Azuno to come out.

Jiguro was having dinner in the tavern. He noticed Balsa watching the tavern keeper's door and came up to her. "Are you really so concerned about what they're talking about? Leave it. I'm sure it's fine."

Balsa shook her head. "I don't think they're talking about gambling stuff. At least, not *only* gambling stuff. That's what worries me."

"I've heard that tomorrow's tournament will wager money," Jiguro said.

"Yeah."

Jiguro took a sip of tea, then placed his cup down on an empty table. "Do you know how Lahura makes her money?" Jiguro asked.

"Doesn't she make it at gambling?" Balsa asked with a little frown.

"The money that Lahura wins is not her own. She lives in service to a clan lord's retainer, who pays for her food, lodging, and travel expenses. Win or lose, the clan lord's retainer has agreed to support her."

Balsa looked up at Jiguro, still frowning. "I...didn't know that."

"No, you wouldn't," Jiguro said. "It's not something she talks about. I sat and drank with her once and she told me the whole story. I was surprised, too. She makes a lot because of her reputation, which means that her sponsor needs to pay her a lot."

Jiguro glanced around the tavern, which was noisy, then said in a voice barely heard, "This is Rota. Many gamblers are supported by government money here. Lahura is successful, yes, but she's old, and soon she won't be able to earn her keep at gambling anymore. The lord who sponsors her probably sees her as a liability. I think he wants her to lose so that the rumor will spread around, and then he'll have to pay her less. It's a common story, sadly."

The tavern keeper's door finally opened. Azuno appeared exhausted, but she was clear-eyed and seemed steadier on her feet. She noticed Balsa staring at her and gave her a lonely sort of smile. Grinding her fists into her hips, she went slowly back to her own room.

Many guests were invited to watch the tournament between Azuno and Lord Salom. No expense was spared on the spectacle. People talked among themselves for a long while before the game began, speculating on strategies.

Azuno didn't use her cavalry forces in the game at all. She attacked with more ill-suited pieces like merchants, artists and the occasional assassin. Her defense was strong and difficult to pierce through, but her attacks were uncommonly weak.

Lord Salom had no unified strategy, but his attack forces gradually started wearing down Azuno's defense. Azuno's was careful not to make it too obvious that she was losing. She often scored points against Lord Salom, but the general trend favored his attack forces.

This was how Azuno would make her money tonight. Not by winning, but by losing.

Lord Takanu looked askance at Azuno often during the tournament, hoping to catch her eye, but Azuno didn't turn her face to him even once.

And so, Azuno lost the game of long susutto that she had played for more than fifty years. Lord Salom gained glory and reputation as a gambler and was gifted land in his grandfather's dominion. All Azuno would receive in exchange were a few silver coins.

The receiving hall erupted in thunderous applause at Lord Salom's victory. Lord Takanu rose quietly from his seat and bowed his head deeply before the assembled guests. He seemed not to hear any of the words of praise lavished on him for hosting such a splendid game. Slowly, and a bit off-balance from his bad leg, he made his way out of the receiving hall.

the wanderer

chapter one

The sound of the rain pattering on the roof strengthened and became a roar. The day itself had been clear and cloudless, but the wind picked up at sunset and it seemed likely that it would rain all night.

"We're in for a storm."

The doctor was just about to go home when the rain started. He looked out the window of the tavern's attic, frowning slightly in concern.

The window he looked through was an empty hole: no glass covered it. The shutters were partway open, allowing wind and a few scattered water droplets into the room.

Jiguro was lying down on a bed close to the window and felt the rain fall on his arm. Instead of a blanket, he was covered by a length of oiled paper that he and Balsa used to keep warm when they were traveling.

The aged doctor sighed heavily, then stopped taking Jiguro's pulse.

Balsa was on another bed, underneath a real blanket. Jiguro's overshirt was pulled open, revealing a wound on his right arm. He was shaking all over and soaked with fever sweat. His eyes were closed. It was hard to tell if he was asleep or unconscious.

The doctor put pressure on Jiguro's chest and stomach, gauging reactions. He wiped his hands on a clean rag that lay folded at his side, then handed it to Balsa.

"Wipe away the sweat," he said.

Balsa concentrated hard on getting every last drop of sweat onto the rag. "What is he sick with?" she asked. "Do you know?"

The doctor began packing up his supplies, preparing to return home. "His eyes are yellow; that's jaundice. The problem is with his liver. I see it a lot with men in his line of work." The doctor looked down.

Balsa glared at the doctor.

"Dad almost never drinks," she said. "I thought drinking was how you get jaundice. Before he got sick, he complained to me that his right arm hurt. It must have hurt really bad. Dad almost never complains, either...could this sickness have something to do with his wound? Maybe it was poisoned."

The doctor glanced over at Jiguro. There was nothing obviously wrong with his arm, and the wound on his there was stitched neatly closed. "I don't think the wound is related to his current sickness," the doctor said. He rifled around in his leather bag and pulled out a small paper sack.

"You could give him this if it's poison," he said. "He should get better in ten days."

Balsa looked like she wanted to ask more questions. She frowned.

"Thing is, I can't give it to you for free," the doctor said. "It's very expensive. I don't think you and your dad can afford it." Jiguro was a

traveling bodyguard, and he had a child in tow. The doctor could tell at a glance that they were far from wealthy.

Rage flashed in Balsa's eyes. "How much is it?"

The doctor named the price.

Balsa felt overheated, then numb all over. It should be illegal to charge that much. She and Jiguro couldn't earn that kind of money working in a tavern for half a year, and taverns were where they made the most. They typically lodged in places that were a bit higher-end thanks to Jiguro's stellar reputation—and his caution: staying in cheaper places was riskier. Jiguro's reputation meant that they could afford to stay, since he received discounted rates, especially from former clients.

The tavern keeper had come to collect payment for their lodging yesterday morning. Balsa and Jiguro usually lived on the road, not at inns or taverns; staying anywhere was expensive, even at a discount. And traveling also had associated expenses. Balsa knew that they had no money to spare for almost anything—even medicine.

But Balsa wasn't about to let something as trivial as money prevent her from saving her father's life. She opened Jiguro's bag with trembling hands and located his money pouch.

Please let there be enough.

"Give me the medicine," Balsa said, counting out coins. Her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

The doctor returned home after receiving Balsa's payment, leaving the paper sack of medicine behind. The only sounds in the room were the rain beating against the shutters and Jiguro's harsh, painful breathing.

Balsa opened the medicine bag and counted twenty pills.

"Dad, you need to get up now. I have medicine." She spoke quietly and shook his shoulder.

Jiguro opened his eyes halfway. Balsa put her arm around his back and helped him into a sitting position. The skin at the nape of his neck was hot and sweaty from his fever. Balsa gave him a pill and some water to help him swallow it. Jiguro lay down again and closed his eyes. He fell asleep quickly, breathing still labored.

Balsa stayed up late listening to the wind outside, watching her foster father's face in the light of flickering candles.

Jiguro had collapsed suddenly the night before Balsa called the doctor. It happened just after Jiguro's work shift at the tavern. He was walking back up to their room in the attic when he clawed desperately for the wall, very close to losing his balance. Balsa rushed up to him, alarmed. He was drenched in sweat and his lips were trembling slightly. She'd never seen him looking so sick before.

"Don't worry about me," Jiguro said. "It's just a fever. It'll pass. Help me upstairs."

Balsa placed Jiguro's heavy arm over her own shoulders and climbed up the stairs slowly and carefully. She lowered him onto his bed. He tried to get comfortable; eventually he sat up and removed his shirt. He sweated and coughed as he slept, dead to the world. Balsa watched over him all night, fetching cold water for rags to keep his forehead cool. She didn't even consider fetching a doctor. She and Jiguro had some medicine on hand that helped with fevers. She fed some to Jiguro overnight, but nothing she gave him brought down the fever at all.

Balsa remained awake long after the tavern owner and workers went to bed, taking care of Jiguro. He got up a few times during the night to pee—and throw up. He was usually so healthy that the contrast was terrifying.

In the morning, Jiguro was still far too ill to work. Balsa told the waiters about the situation, and they told the tavern keeper, who gave Jiguro the day off.

One of the waitresses, Mana, had been good friends with Balsa since she'd saved Mana's boyfriend, Arl, from some serious gambling trouble. She knew of a good doctor that lived in the area. Balsa asked Mana to call the doctor, and he arrived at the tavern that evening.

It had been seven years since Jiguro took six-year-old Balsa by the hand and fled their homeland of Kanbal. Jiguro and Balsa had gotten sick plenty of times before, but usually, it was just a cold or a stomachache caused by something they'd eaten. Jiguro was prone to colds in the early days after their flight, since he had no reputation as a bodyguard and had to take the worst, lowest-paying jobs. He and Balsa trudged through rain and mud and snow all day long and rarely got the opportunity to rest.

But serious illness was rare. It didn't take Jiguro too long to make a name for himself, and after that, their lives were easier—though not easy. Higher-profile, better-paying jobs meant more danger. He took wounds in battle that festered and caused terrible fevers like the one he was suffering from now—but no fever had ever lasted quite this long without breaking.

As Balsa sat next to him, sleepless, during the long night, she started to feel genuine worry. Jiguro had taught her how to treat cuts and injuries so that they wouldn't get infected; he probably knew better how to treat himself than the doctor did. And his constitution was such that he was never sick for extended periods of time.

But tonight was different. There was no obvious, serious injury that could have caused a fever this high. Her eyes dropped to the wound on his arm. *Could it really be that? But I thought it was almost healed…*

The doctor was dismissive of the wound, but Balsa couldn't think of any other cause of this terrible sickness. She had to assume that the blade that had dealt it to him was poisoned—or that the wound was contaminated in some other way.

If that was the case and the medicine didn't work, Jiguro might die.

Balsa hugged herself to prevent her hands from shaking.

chapter two

Guarding taverns was much different from protecting caravans from bandits and thieves. This tavern in particular was one where Jiguro had worked for quite some time, and it was usually very safe, as far as bodyguarding work went. Jiguro had to break up a few drunken fights or escort customers out of the tavern sometimes, but that was as dangerous as things got.

The tavern was protected, at least partially, by its reputation. It was a hub for gamblers in the region and had the patronage of Lord Nakazu. Petty criminals had no clout there. For the most part, customers were there because they had money and status, and wanted to either watch or participate in games of chance.

However, Lord Nakazu had enemies—and sometimes, those enemies made their presence felt.

One night, just after the tavern opened, gamblers gathered at their table and started an impromptu tournament. There was nothing strange about this; it was a perfectly ordinary night at the tavern. The village the tavern was in was located between a major national road and a river, so it was a favorable location for trade between the northern and southern clan lords. It was also a common stopping point for traveling artists and merchants. Consequently, no one really noticed

or cared about strangers, since strangers passed in and out all the time. This was true at the tavern as well. Balsa always recognized a few faces, but many of the people who came to gamble each night were unfamiliar.

Balsa was delivering drinks to a table when she caught sight of four men sitting at a table near a window. She didn't know why, but they gave her a funny feeling. She returned to the kitchen to deliver another tray of food and kept sneaking surreptitious glances at the men. They didn't seem to notice her, but they were looking all around the tavern—and taking notes, which they passed across the table.

Are they casing the joint? Do they plan to rob us?

They might just be looking for someone, but Balsa didn't think so. They weren't scanning the tavern for friendly faces: they pointed to a spot and stared at it, then shifted focus. Balsa was suddenly very glad that Jiguro was here. He could handle four men easily—and protecting places, with violence if necessary, was what he was good at.

At first glance, the four men appeared to be caravaners or merchants. They carried longswords for protection, but the style and make of the weapons was different from what clan lords and their retainers carried. Balsa didn't recognize where the weapons were from, and that concerned her. Who were these people?

Balsa passed through the crowd and caught Jiguro's eye. He stood near the wall. Balsa tilted her head toward the men. Jiguro nodded in understanding—he'd seen them, too. Jiguro gave no sign that anything was amiss. He maintained his watch on the tavern, paying no special attention to the four men. He moved closer to the middle of the wall so that he could act quickly in case the men attacked.

But how could he know where the attack would happen? Balsa thought about that as she nursed his fever. She thought that if she could only get into his head, see what he'd seen and feel what he'd felt, she would be able to tell what was wrong with him now.

The night that Jiguro was injured, Balsa kept delivering food and drinks to tables, wondering when the suspicious men would make their move. For the longest time, they didn't. They sat at their table, ate, drank, and gambled a little—trying to blend in.

Balsa felt someone's eyes on her and looked toward Jiguro. He was staring directly at her. The expression on his face conveyed a warning. Balsa came closer to him.

"Check on Tagga for me," he said. "I think he's just gambling, but you know how it is when he gets into his cups. Ask him to come talk to me, if he's of a mind."

Balsa nodded, tucked her empty tray into her chest and withdrew. Tagga was another bodyguard that was paid to protect this tavern. He was an even-tempered man, but big and burly; just the sight of him was enough to make most belligerent drunks docile and quiet. He was a useful man to have around in the tavern, but since no one ever really thought of threatening someone that big, his sense of danger wasn't as honed as Jiguro's.

Jiguro had told her once that she was also good at seeing the things that Tagga never noticed. She remembered those words as she looked for Tagga, glowing with happiness on the inside.

Customers sitting at a table near the kitchen laughed uproariously at a joke. They were so loud that many other customers looked toward them, startled. Balsa also looked their way, and that was when it happened.

The four suspicious men all stood up at once, and Jiguro moved to intercept them. One of the men kicked their table over in indignation. "This place is a scam! They served me beer that's gone bad!"

Tableware and dishes fell to the floor and broke in pieces.

Another man stood up at the table next to the four suspicious men and yelled, "If anything's gone bad, it's you! Didn't you order the most expensive shit they have? Maybe your palate isn't refined enough to appreciate it, you clumsy oaf!"

People at the surrounding tables started whispering to one another.

"What's going on?"

"We should get out of here."

The man yelling at the four suspicious men drew his sword, scowling. Jiguro approached from behind and rested a heavy hand on the man's shoulder. "I understand that you're upset, sir, but that's no reason to draw your weapon. You're frightening all these people."

The man dropped into his chair. It didn't look like Jiguro was pressing down very hard, but the weight of his hand was enough to

keep him in place. When the man was calmer, Jiguro approached the four other men.

"No one's impugned the quality of the beer in this tavern before," Jiguro said casually. "That sounds like an excuse to cause trouble to me. Who sent you?" His voice wasn't loud, but it carried.

"You lookin' to pick a fight?" one of the men asked. "We ain't no liars, if that's what you're thinkin'."

The man who'd upended the table laughed in a low voice. "Seems this whole place is rotten, not just the beer. What terrible luck." He glanced around the tavern with sharp, angry eyes. "But y'all shouldn't blame us. It's Lord Nakazu that lets the tavern serve this swill."

The man's words acted as a signal. He drew his sword, as did his three companions.

Customers surrounding the four men's table rose to their feet and tried to flee. Jiguro didn't want this situation to escalate further, so he didn't draw his weapon. He took the man next to the leader by the collar and shoved him to the ground, hard.

All four men were standing close together, so the other three were forced back as their comrade went down. One of them lost his balance and went tripping backwards.

Two attackers remained upright. Balsa was observing from the side. She gasped when Jiguro punched the closest attacker in the spleen.

Three men were down, and stayed down, groaning from their wounds. Their leader didn't pay them any mind. When possible, Jiguro handled problems in the tavern bare-handed. Weapons were for killing, not for breaking up drunken fights.

Jiguro wasn't armed with his spear or his sword tonight. He carried a short Rotan knife called a rattsu as a just-in-case measure. The blade was broad and the hilt was heavy. Aside from that, he had no other weapons.

Balsa realized that Jiguro was lacking his spear mere moments before her danger sense activated. She leaned forward, fists clenched and warm all over. Jiguro was in trouble. He took down the last man, and for a second it seemed like everything was fine—but the tip of the man's blade grazed his stomach.

Jiguro grunted in pain, but remained upright. "Don't look at me!" he shouted. "Get the owner out of here!"

Balsa was stunned. What was happening? She watched Jiguro twist behind the man and twist his arm, breaking it. The man screamed.

It seemed to Balsa like all the bad guys were taken care of…why did the tavern owner have to leave? Balsa didn't understand. She heard more weapons leaving their sheaths and looked around. There was another man standing by the door of the tavern. Balsa had never seen him before.

The man with the broken arm gave a hand signal, and the man at the door threw a dagger, aiming it at Jiguro's side. Jiguro stepped aside so that the dagger merely grazed his arm, but he was still bleeding. Balsa stared fixedly at the wound, astonished—and a little frightened.

Jiguro pulled his rattsu knife and pressed the attack on the man standing by the door.

So the tavern owner can escape! Balsa realized. But she didn't move. She knew that she should, but her feet were frozen to the floor. She

understood that this was a planned, coordinated attack that had been premeditated by all these men. They had probably brought so many because they'd seen Jiguro at work and knew that a few poorly trained men wouldn't be up to the task. She didn't think that these attackers would simply let the tavern owner escape. Balsa should go and protect the tavern owner right now, but she thought that if she did that, Jiguro might be killed by these men.

Jiguro put some distance between himself and the men attacking him, weaving through panicked customers. Blood dripped from his arm onto the floor. Time seemed to stand still. Until this moment, it had never occurred to Balsa that Jiguro would die someday. She hadn't believed that death could ever touch him. A shiver went through her entire body.

The three men who'd originally caused the disturbance surrounded Jiguro. Their long swords weren't very useful in close quarters, so they sheathed them and attacked Jiguro with their daggers and short swords instead. One man lunged, screaming as he struck out wildly with his sword. Jiguro caught his weapon on his own, and the sword split in two with a splintering noise. Without missing a beat, Jiguro thrust his rattsu knife into the now-weaponless man's upper arm.

Jiguro couldn't use his injured arm; it was hurt too badly. But he was able to clear some space around himself by threatening the other attackers with his rattsu knife. The knife was a heavier, broader weapon than the short swords that the other attackers carried, and they knew it. They triangulated on Jiguro, driving him into a corner.

Balsa never knew that the rattsu could be used as such an effective weapon. In Kanbal, it was mainly used in narrow places where larger weapons wouldn't do; it certainly wasn't favored by warriors. Its main disadvantage was that it was heavy for its size, but Jiguro wielded it as if it were as light as air. Balsa couldn't do the same. She wasn't strong enough yet.

Balsa gritted her teeth and watched the battle. Jiguro showed no sign of favoring his wounded right arm, choosing to expose it to his attackers more than anything else—maybe he was trying to concentrate all of their strikes in one spot? He felled his attackers one by one. Balsa could only tell where he would strike next by watching his eyes very carefully.

Jiguro didn't kill them. He broke their arms or injured them so that they wouldn't be a threat and couldn't flee. As the battle progressed, he was covered more in his attackers' blood than his own. His wound kept bleeding, spattering the men who attacked him with fine red droplets.

Jiguro glanced over at Balsa, breathing ragged and eyes sharp. He nodded at her, and she finally moved.

The tavern keeper's name was Sadol. Balsa ran to his room. She heard a terrible disturbance inside and slid open the door. The man who did much of the tavern's accounting and bookkeeping, Tonal, was inside. Tonal was Sadol's oldest son, though they looked almost nothing alike. He looked up at Balsa with a bitter frown.

Sadol was crouched down behind the room's huge desk. "What's going on out there?" he asked.

Balsa told him everything she knew about the attack on the tavern. "I think all the men who wanted to attack you are here, but there could be more lying in wait. You should flee this place for your own safety."

Sadol's eyebrows furrowed together. "You said they mentioned Lord Nakazu?"

"Yes."

Sadol folded his arms and considered for a long while. Then he turned to his son and said, "Go to that man Touza, the moneylender. Ask him to give you ten men, then come back here. We'll pay him, of course. Remember to be courteous. He's not to be trifled with."

Tonal left. Sadol unfolded his arms and leaned against the wall to help himself stand, then drew his own sword. It was not the kind of light, flashy sword that travelers and merchants often carried. It looked to be of older style, though it was well cared for. Balsa hadn't seen Sadol fight before, but she suspected that he knew how to use his sword.

Sadol looked down at Balsa, his eyebrows big and bushy, and gave her a confident smile. "There are still enemies in the house. I can't flee. I'm obligated to protect this place."

He came out from behind the desk and left the room through the open door. Balsa followed him quietly. When she and Jiguro had just started working in this tavern, she'd gotten the impression that Sadol was not a very honorable man. Her impression of him changed all at once as they traveled down the hall. He'd gotten into his current position by collecting on gambling debts for Lord Nakazu, and it seemed that we was willing and able to defend what was his.

Sadol and Balsa arrived at the main room of the tavern. Sadol looked around warily. The attackers were on the floor, unconscious or incapacitated. The tables and chairs were in disarray, and the waiters had their backs pressed to the wall, faces pale. The floor was stained with blood. Jiguro stood over the attackers, watchful, but none of them moved.

"Everyone," Sadol bellowed, "I'm Sadol, the owner of this tavern. What seems to be the problem here?"

The attackers, waiters, and few remaining customers who hadn't run all looked toward Sadol.

"I apologize greatly for the disturbance. It seems these buffoons were determined to ruin dinner for all of us. Is anyone hurt? Does anyone need help?"

No one said a word. Sadol took a step forward. "Drinks and food are on the house tonight! No one expects to witness such terrible violence while they eat. If there's anything else I can do for you, please, let me know."

Customers who were regulars to the tavern seemed to calm down some, but the atmosphere in the room was still tense. One thickset man actually smiled.

"Well, since you're offering," a gambler put in, "this attack has really spoiled all our luck. What do you say to forgiving debts to the house as a way to even the odds?"

Sadol hesitated slightly, but he nodded. "Of course. All debts to the house are forgiven."

There were more people smiling now. Several gamblers resumed their games. Gradually, customers righted chairs and tables and resumed their seats. With peace restored, the tavern became as noisy and raucous as it had been before the attack.

Balsa continued her serving duties, ducking and dodging between red-faced, drunken men. She rushed over to Jiguro at the earliest opportunity. He stood near the wall standing guard over the men who had attacked the tavern. All told, there were seven of them, and they weren't moving. Balsa smelled blood and sweat and the air felt too warm.

"How's your arm?" she asked.

Jiguro glanced toward his wounded right arm. It was red and still tacky with blood. Ordinarily he would have tied the arm off and tended to the cut, but he was still on duty.

"We need to get that washed and sewn up," Balsa said. "More men are coming to protect this place. It'll be okay."

She looked down at the injured attackers with a little frown. Most had broken bones. One was crouched in on himself, holding his head like he was in agony.

"I guess we should get a doctor for them, too," she said tonelessly. She crouched down on the floor near them, earning a surprised glare from Jiguro. He looked like he was staring right through her. Slowly, he closed his eyes, then resumed his vigilant watch over the injured men.

Balsa didn't understand the reason for the glare, at first. Then she remembered that, since all the attackers were still alive, there was a

possibility that one of them might pull her down and get her by the throat. She blushed, ashamed of her own negligence.

It doesn't matter how strong you are, or how good of a fighter. If you let your guard down even once, the battle might as well be over. As long as people draw breath, they'll keep fighting for their own survival—with nails and teeth if they have no other weapons. Never underestimate your enemies.

"It doesn't matter if they're down," Jiguro said. "Always defend yourself." His voice sounded strained. "Do you plan to kill people someday?"

Balsa looked up at him.

"These men brought swords," he said. "They would have killed you, if you'd let them."

Balsa said nothing. She curled into a ball like an insect and watched the injured men from a safe distance away.

The next morning, the tavern received reports that the previous night's attackers were well-known ruffians in the area. They'd also attacked Rahom, a town to the south, fairly recently. Many men had been hired to harass and bully Lord Nakazu's businesses nearby, and the mercenaries used the foothills near Rahom as a hideout.

Not all of the mercenaries were common thieves and warriors. Some were known to have connections to Rota's clan lords. How the

clan lords allowed their wayward relations to go so far astray of the straight and narrow path was no great mystery: many of the men who joined the bandits were third sons or distant cousins with no chance of advancement within the clan. Unlike common bandits, most of these clan offshoots were well-trained in martial arts from birth, in addition to other formal education. The people who lived in their path fled in terror of them as their numbers swelled.

The tavern owner, Sadol, heard this news and hired even more guards.

"I may not need more, since you're the best," Sadol said to Jiguro. "I've been in this business for a long time, but by my count, it was seven-on-one last night, and you were the one! I've never seen anything like it." He praised Jiguro further and paid for his medical treatment, and also paid him extra that week as thanks.

The men who responded to the increased call for guards appeared to be hardened warriors. Jiguro and Sadol had some cause to fear that these men might belong to the bandit group. They might be using the situation to their advantage and planning to attack again. Jiguro had a sixth sense about people; it was the same kind of thing that caused the hair on the back of a dog's neck to stand on end when there was a threat.

The bodyguards-for-hire felt Jiguro's eyes on them and returned his poor regard with bad manners and ill-intentioned glares. Jiguro never reacted to their behavior, but Balsa knew him well and could tell that he was inwardly seething.

"That bastard! How does he fight so well with his arm hurt like that?" one of the bodyguards-for-hire asked, making his friends laugh

and huddle in commiseration. They were gambling, and Jiguro wasn't close enough for them to see.

But Balsa saw and heard them—and Jiguro heard them, too. She felt Jiguro's hand come down on her shoulder as she left the main room of the tavern.

"Are you an attack dog?" Jiguro asked her.

Balsa gaped at him and remained silent.

"If you're not a dog, why is the hair on the back of your neck standing up?" He folded his arms. "What do you think of them?"

Balsa said nothing in reply.

Jiguro gritted his teeth, then let her shoulder go somewhat reluctantly, like a dog releasing a bone from its mouth. "Bring me my spear," he said.

Balsa dashed off to get it. She didn't want to look at Jiguro when he was like this—in pain, and worried.

chapter three

Balsa sat at Jiguro's bedside. He was still sweating, but he seemed to be deeply asleep now.

Is there really something wrong with his liver?

Balsa couldn't get a second diagnosis; there were no other doctors near here. All she could do was pray that Jiguro was healthy enough to fight off whatever terrible thing was trying to kill him.

Jiguro's fever came down a little at dawn. Balsa didn't know if the doctor's medicine was effective or if Jiguro was recovering on his own, but recovery was recovery, and Balsa allowed herself to relax a little. She collapsed to the floor and was instantly asleep.

Balsa remained asleep next to Jiguro until the tavern opened and the waitresses arrived. If Balsa and Jiguro didn't work, they wouldn't get paid or be allowed to eat, but neither one of them was in any shape to work. Jiguro slept until the evening, when the waitresses were having a shift change.

"Dad, are you okay? How are you feeling? Do you want something to eat? Does anything hurt?"

Jiguro shifted to look at Balsa. His fever was still there, but significantly decreased, and his skin wasn't slack and pale anymore. He

was definitely getting better.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me." Jiguro rubbed his eyes.

Balsa watched him try to get up and made no move to help him. If he needed help, he would ask.

Jiguro managed to get up on his own. He went to work, and improved slowly over the next few days. Balsa still fretted over him; she couldn't help it. But bodyguards got hurt and sick on the job all the time, and Jiguro wasn't about to let a little lingering weakness prevent him from working.

Balsa had never seen him looking so weak before. It was obvious to her that he still wasn't well. She looked in on him during her own breaks to make sure he was all right. Most late nights were free time for them, so she filled the time with idle chatter about Torogai's hut and past jobs until they went to sleep. She also told him about helping out Tanda's family with the rice harvest when he was gone in the capital, and that she'd seen the strange tolcha grave markers that the Yakoo believed were guardian spirits.

Jiguro never said much, but listening to Balsa made him calm—and he was definitely listening. When she told him about going fishing with Tanda and pushing him into the river, not really on accident, he coughed.

Only...it wasn't a cough. Balsa looked over at him, wide-eyed. Was he *laughing*?

He didn't laugh for very long, though. He cleared his throat. "Tanda's a good kid."

Balsa wanted to laugh, too. She didn't mind that Jiguro was praising Tanda or anything, but she was never on the receiving end of those words. She wasn't sure why she frowned and said, "He's an idiot. He wasn't catching the fish; he was playing with them!"

Jiguro was still smiling. He blinked and kept his eyes closed for a moment, then opened them, looking Balsa directly in the eyes. "Do you want to live in Torogai's hut?"

Balsa gave him a quizzical expression.

"If you'd rather not keep living like this with me, I'm sure Torogai would take you in. She might complain that it was a bother at first, but she wouldn't mean it."

Balsa felt like she'd just been slapped. A shiver crept up her spine. Her heart was in her throat and her lips trembled slightly. She shook her head. "No way. I'm staying with you."

Jiguro looked up at the ceiling. He wasn't smiling anymore.

The second day after Jiguro's collapse, Sadol went to go visit some of his friends. When he came back, his attitude toward Jiguro was much altered. Two days later, Sadol's son Tonal came to Jiguro and Balsa's room and told them that Sadol had hired a new bodyguard, and that the tavern needed this room free to house them.

"I'm still recovering from my injury," Jiguro said. "Can we rent a different room here for a while? Just until I find new work."

There were no rooms available in the tavern except the small, cramped room in the attic that no one else wanted. Jiguro accepted it and paid to rent it.

Balsa grumbled to Jiguro as she unfolded the mildewy blankets in the attic. "He's a stingy old bastard. If not for you, he would be dead and this tavern would be gone!"

Jiguro lay down on his own bed and sighed deeply. "It's no use saying something like that now."

"I will say it," Balsa insisted. "It's like he completely forgot what you did for him! Who would ever work for a shit-for-brains like that?"

When Jiguro answered, he sounded tired. "You're mistaken."

Balsa frowned. "How?"

Jiguro said nothing. He closed his eyes.

Balsa kept thinking about what he'd said all throughout her work shift, but she couldn't figure out why Jiguro had said she was mistaken. Mistaken about what? Every word she'd said was true.

Maybe dad thinks it's because it's just work? He's a bodyguard, so if he's too sick or injured to work then Sadol doesn't have to keep him on, or something? But if he let dad get better, he could work again... Sadol should be more grateful... Dad defended his life and his tavern that night.

Balsa tried explaining her position to Jiguro again in a more measured way. He nodded.

"Yes, all of that is only right and natural for you to think."

"Then how was I wrong?"

"You're not; not this time. Your rage at Sadol was coloring your opinion. You've calmed down now, and remembered that it's all just work. Sadol pays us; he doesn't have to thank us. And making moral judgments about a client isn't useful or helpful. You probably think I should have talked myself up more, or been rewarded more, but that's not how this business operates."

Balsa stared silently at the floor. She couldn't argue with that, even though she still wanted to. None of this was fair.

Jiguro kept his eyes on the ceiling. "Sadol's gratitude isn't needed, or expected. You understand that, right?"

Balsa glanced sidelong at Jiguro. She understood what he was saying just fine, but she didn't understand why work had to be the way he said it was.

Five days after Jiguro fell ill, he was almost completely well, and started training with the spear again. He spoke to Sadol in the afternoon and came up to his and Balsa's room. He started packing.

"We're heading to Yogo next."

"We are? Are there signs of our pursuers? Are we in danger?"

Jiguro shook his head. "No, I've seen no sign of anyone following us. But we should never stay for too long in one place. I'm planning to stay at Torogai's hut over the winter months."

Jiguro picked up his spear, testing its weight in his hand. "There's a caravan heading to northern Rota, carrying toshal." Toshal was an herb mixed with alcohol that was used for treating wounds. "They're paying well for guards, so I signed on. We'll accompany them to the Traders' Market. We need to leave soon, or the Samal Pass will be buried in snow by the time we head west to Yogo."

"Dad..."

Jiguro adjusted his grip. There was an undercurrent or fear or worry in Balsa's tone that made him look at her. "Is anything wrong?"

"I'm still worried...about you getting sick. Are you all better now?" Her tongue felt like ash in her mouth; she could say no more. It was good news that Jiguro had managed to find a new job already, but caravans that paid well were always high-risk. He'd probably taken the job because it would get them close enough to New Yogo's border for them to make it through the mountain passes before the onset of winter, but she was scared that he had other reasons—reasons that he wasn't telling her.

One week after Jiguro's recovery, he and Balsa left the tavern. They had to leave for the new caravan guarding job at dawn. The waitresses of the tavern popped their heads into the attic room, making sure that Balsa and Jiguro were awake and that they would leave on time.

Mana pressed a bundle wrapped in oiled paper into Balsa's hands. "It's from everyone. We bought you some new clothes. It's not much,

but..."

Tears sprang to Balsa's eyes. "Thank you. You didn't have to..."

"You're going on another journey, aren't you? Your sleeves are up to your elbows and your pants are up to your knees! You can't travel like that in winter; you'd freeze. Your dad would probably take care of it, but he's a man's man...I wanted you to have something nice. As things are now, you look like a little boy who's outgrown his clothes."

Balsa had recently cut her hair. She looked down at herself. Mana was right; she did look like a boy, but she didn't consider that a problem. "My hair's easier to wash if it's short, and my clothes are easier to take care of if they're smaller," she said.

Mana exchanged glances with one of the other waitresses. They smiled at one another, exasperated.

"Tsk tsk," Mana clicked her tongue. "You're getting to the age where boys are going to notice you, y'know. Unfortunately, there's no time now for us to teach you everything you need to know... And besides, the clothes we bought you are traveling clothes. Make sure to wash them and take care of them, okay?"

Balsa frowned a little as Mana pulled her into a gentle hug. She heard people stirring downstairs: the tavern was opening. It was almost time for her and Jiguro to leave.

"Take care of yourself," Mana said. "And if you're ever around here again, please come and say hi." Tears glistened on her cheeks. She and Balsa had spent so much time together over the past few months that parting with Balsa caused her genuine pain.

Balsa thanked her, then bowed. She gave Mana her best smile, then followed Jiguro downstairs. She was used to saying goodbye to people...but she, too, was close to crying. She and Jiguro rarely stayed in one place for so long.

Balsa looked over her shoulder after she and Jiguro went up the road a little way. Mana and the other waitresses were outside, waving. Balsa didn't wave. She kept trudging behind Jiguro.

chapter four

The morning bell started ringing. The sun climbed in the sky as Jiguro and Balsa walked. It was a clear autumn day.

Jiguro stopped in front of a large building roofed with shiny red shingles. This was an employment agency that matched bodyguards and caravan guards with clients. The yard and the road outside the building were cluttered with carts and bustling with people despite the earliness of the hour. The entrance was large enough for many people to pass through at once. There were no lights on inside, but the sun was bright enough for Balsa to see people walking in front of counters and taking seats to wait.

Balsa and Jiguro stepped into the wide yard. It was so packed with people that the air was stiflingly warm. The air was also stale and smelled like horses, manure, and sweat. Every business that employed bodyguards smelled exactly the same. Balsa was used to it, and found the mix of smells strangely comforting. She was actually feeling a little excited to set out and go somewhere new.

Jiguro led Balsa inside. There were a few rooms for rent and places to eat, in addition to the counters where business was conducted. Breakfast was still being made; there was thin smoke in the air from the bread ovens where bam was baking.

They got their assignments and went outside to the yard again. Balsa saw a tiny insect hovering around people as she and Jiguro pressed through the crowd. She didn't recognize it at first, but then it flew right over her.

"Ah, a bee!"

"It's a grain bee," Jiguro said. He looked around the yard. "Looks like there are a whole lot of ‘em."

"What's a grain bee?"

"They eat the juices of tosha, a kind of grain. It's the grain they use to ferment toshul. Looks like the grain bees are gathering around the barrels."

Balsa watched the bees flying to and fro between barrels. She couldn't count how many there were, but she guessed that there were over a hundred.

"Yikes! There's a lot of them..." a man said.

Balsa turned toward him. He was Kanbalese and carrying a spear much like hers and Jiguro's. His beard and hair were more gray than not, so he was much older than Jiguro. He was also taller and broader, and appeared to be in excellent health.

"You, boy. How much do you think a barrel of that sells for?"

Balsa blinked. She'd been mistaken for a boy again. A girl carrying a spear in a place like this was an unusual sight in places like this, so it was easier for her to dress as a boy to blend in. Most people who'd never met Jiguro and Balsa before assumed that Balsa was Jiguro's son.

She looked at the barrels of toshal again. Toshal was used as medicine and not as a recreational drink; the tavern where she and Jiguro worked never had any of it. But she knew the going price for it, since Jiguro had told her: one small jar would cost its weight in silver. A barrel would probably be worth forty times that.

Balsa whistled, impressed. "Wow! It's liquid gold!"

The older Kanbalese man grinned. His eyebrows rose slightly. "You're still young, but you've got a good head on your shoulders." He looked up at Jiguro. "You have a fine son there, sir."

Jiguro patted Balsa's head fondly, making her scowl. "Thanks. But this isn't my son; it's my daughter."

The man's eyes went wide. "You're teaching your *daughter* the spear?"

Balsa looked up at Jiguro, more than a little confused. When she was younger, Jiguro usually didn't correct people when they said she was a boy, but lately, he had been correcting people. She didn't know why. When she'd asked, Jiguro had said, "You're already thirteen," as if that answered the question. What did being thirteen have to do with anything?

Jiguro opened and extended his right hand: a gesture often used before polite, formal greetings in Kanbal. "I'm Nadol Go Saram."

The man nodded, then shook Jiguro's extended hand. "I'm Sumal Go Saram. We're of the same clan, it seems, though I've never seen you before. I guess this caravan needs a lot of guards, so it's drawn a lot of us from Kanbal." The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled.

Just after Sumal introduced himself, several men emerged from inside the red-shingled building. They weren't bodyguards, but merchants. They saw Jiguro and Sumal and came over.

"Ah, it seems that everyone's here now," a merchant said. "We should prepare for departure." The merchant appeared to be in his mid-twenties. Despite his young age, the other men around him treated him respectfully, so he must be an important man. He peeled away from the other merchants, directing traffic with a stern expression. When it seemed like the preparations for leaving were well underway, he returned to Jiguro.

"So, you're the new guard?" he asked. "You can sleep and eat with the others tonight. Be up early tomorrow; breakfast is served before sunup."

The merchant's gaze fell on Balsa. "Oi! You're not thinking to bring a child along, are you?"

"I believe our shared acquaintance informed you that this child would be coming with me," Jiguro said. "I'll cover all their traveling expenses and food out of my own wages. This child's father died while protecting a caravan. I won't bore you with the details, but I pledged to take care of them and I won't go back on my word. It seems that there was a miscommunication somewhere, so I'll formally ask permission for the child to come with us."

The merchant frowned. "Even if you pay for his food, won't he still need to borrow a horse? What an awful thing to happen, just before we leave this morning..."

"This child doesn't need a horse," Jiguro said, hoping to put an end to the merchant's complaints.

"Are you thinking of letting him ride with the wagons? There's no room. We're at capacity as it is."

"I'm not thinking of the wagons, either," Jiguro said. "This child will follow the caravan on foot. I don't anticipate any problems. If they can't keep up, that's their problem, not yours."

"You must be joking," the merchant said.

"I'm not," Jiguro said. "This kid has followed countless caravans, and there's never been an issue."

The merchant looked Balsa over, up and down. He couldn't make any more logistical objections, but he still seemed to want an excuse to leave Balsa behind. "If he collapses on the way, it'll mean trouble for us. The caravan can't slow down if we're going to reach our destination before winter."

"The caravan won't need to slow down," Jiguro said. "If he collapses, I'll leave him there. You have my oath as a caravan guard in good standing." His tone was clarion-bright and undeniably sincere.

The merchant turned away, looking at the other guards. One of the guards stepped out of the crowd and approached Jiguro.

"I'm Gozu. I'll be leading the caravan guards on this expedition."

Jiguro nodded in acknowledgement. "I'm Nadol."

Gozu looked at Balsa. "How old is this kid?" he asked.

"Thirteen."

Gozu hmphed. "Well, I believe you. They make ‘em tough in Kanbal, in mind as well as in body. As long as the kid doesn't need a horse, you're welcome to come along." Then he frowned slightly. "There is one other problem. We're carrying precious cargo. Bandits would consider just one barrel to be a prize worth dying for. If we're attacked, will you protect the kid first, or the barrels?"

Jiguro was about to reply when someone chuckled. "Do you really need to ask that, Gozu? He's stupid enough to bring a kid along on a trip like this. No matter what he says, you know what he'll do."

The man was eighteen or nineteen, and appeared to be another guard. He laughed, then spat on the ground near Balsa's feet.

"What's the world coming to? Hiring old geezers and men with kids...well, whatever. But we're really scraping the bottom of the barrel now." He faced Jiguro. "This is some shit you've pulled, right before we leave—you know we don't have time to argue. Gozu, I think we should pick up another guard at our first stop. We're better off hiring someone without a kid."

Gozu's face clouded over. Many of the other guards also seemed troubled. Jiguro didn't spare the rude guard a second glance, and focused solely on Gozu.

"Does that man have a lot of experience?" he asked.

The rude guard put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Oi! Don't ask stupid questions!"

"I don't actually know," Gozu said. "The placement agency asked me to hire him to get him more experience guarding caravans. This is the first time I've worked with him." Gozu waved to the rude guard. "I'm

sure you know what the most important part of protecting a caravan is, right?"

The rude guard frowned sourly. "Duh, of course. If you doubt my experience, ask me again after I've used my sword on anyone who might menace this caravan."

Gozu sighed. "We have an idiot on our hands. The most important thing to remember when you're guarding a caravan is to protect your fellow guards. If anyone gets the jump on us, all the rest of us need to respond immediately. If you can't get along with and trust your comrades, you'll never be a successful caravan guard. The kid has already caused fewer problems than you. You should be ashamed of your behavior."

"You joking or what?" the rude guard asked. "Who'd you rather have with you in a pinch, that kid or me?"

Jiguro took a step forward. "I have a way to test that idea. I propose a contest between my son and this man. If my son wins, you'll have your proof."

The rude guard wasn't the only one surprised at Jiguro's suggestion. Gozu and the other guards looked between Balsa and the rude guard, making comparisons in size with their glances. They didn't believe that Jiguro was serious.

"I have experience," Jiguro said. "My son does, too. It's dangerous work, guarding a caravan—we both know that well. My son may be a child still, but he's guarded more caravans than this man, and is able to guard them better. I believe that my son also has more combat experience."

Jiguro placed his hand on Balsa's shoulder. "Go on, and earn a place for yourself."

Balsa nodded. The rude guard was very tall, but she was used to fighting people bigger than her—Jiguro, for instance. She summoned her focus, feeling heat build in her stomach like it always did at the beginning of a battle. She bared her teeth fiercely, like a rabid dog, then settled her own spear over her head in a high stance.

The rude guard looked her over, turning bright red from embarrassment. He drew his sword with a flashy, pointless move.

Dad's right. He's a complete moron.

Even so, the longsword was a dangerous weapon, and he was much larger than her. She couldn't afford to let her guard down. If he rushed at her, he might knock her off-balance and manage to injure her, and then, the fight would be over. She considered the idea that he might underestimate her—he was dumb, after all—but she couldn't count on that, either.

She had to ask herself if he actually intended to kill her, or just humiliate her. She didn't know. Her goal was to defeat him; if he was stupid enough to get himself killed, so be it.

Silence all around. Balsa held her breath. There were so many innocent bystanders. This fight would be hard, not just because her opponent was a clumsy oaf, but because she had to avoid injuring all these extra people and horses. Balsa took in her environment, noting the placement of the road and the main building, considering her first move.

The rude guard stood there with his unsheathed sword and let out a wordless yell. He closed the distance between them in a single bound, but Balsa expected that. She noted the placement of his sword and aimed her spear at the lower part of his stomach.

The rude guard side-stepped the spear, but he faltered in his footing a bit. The tip of the spear grazed his outer armor as he dodged. He scowled at her. Balsa didn't pause in her attacks and aimed her next one directly at the center part of his blade. He caught her spear, but his sword went flying out of his hand.

Frustrated and enraged, the rude guard reached for Balsa's spear and attempted to wrestle it away from her. He got Balsa off-balance enough to retrieve his sword, then struck straight down.

Balsa dodged the strike, still smiling fiercely as she led him on a merry dance in circles. The rude guard grunted in rage, his face bright red, and followed after her, blocking her moves. His movements were no longer purposeful, but reactive: he was behaving more like a beast than a human.

Gozu feared that some harm might come to Balsa or the other people present from the guard's wild swings, so he called out, "Stop! We've seen enough!"

The rude guard didn't seem to hear him, and kept pressing his attack on Balsa.

Jiguro set his hand on Gozu's shoulder. "Let them fight it out," he said. "It's almost over."

"It's over now, as far as I'm concerned," Gozu said.

Jiguro caught Balsa's eye. "The other guards understand this fight, but the merchants won't unless you win decisively," he called out to her. "Finish him off."

Balsa crouched down like a small mountain monkey. She was too low for the rude guard to strike, and it was obvious that she was simply toying with him. He chased her behind a wooden bit of scaffolding, then waited for her to come out of hiding. He was planning to aim for her head when she emerged, not to kill her, but to knock her out. He could disarm her and mangle her arm so that she wouldn't be able to fight him anymore.

But Balsa anticipated his potential strategies. She looped around the scaffolding, coming out on the opposite side of what he'd expected. She was behind him. He felt her presence and slashed out with his sword, but the blade bit nothing but air. It was so long, and he struck out so strongly, that the tip of the blade struck the flagstones beneath their feet, shooting sparks in all directions.

Balsa closed the distance between them, ramming her forehead into his chin. The rude guard bent backwards from the force of the headbutt. His grip on the sword loosened. As he righted himself, Balsa brought her knee up and hit him squarely in the stomach.

The rude guard brought one hand to his mouth, and felt blood there.

"I told you to finish him, not play with him," Jiguro shouted to her.

Balsa blinked. It was true that she'd been showing off a little. She knew what she had to do, but she hadn't realized there was a rush. She

brought her spear up and around and landed a solid hit on the rude guard's collarbone, shattering it instantly.

The sound of breaking bone was sickening. Balsa felt the bone give way under her hands and shuddered. The rude guard screamed and collapsed instantly onto the flagstones, howling in agony with his knees clutched to his chest.

Jiguro stepped between Balsa and the rude guard and crouched down. He shoved his fingers in the man's mouth so that he wouldn't swallow his tongue and waited for the spasms of pain to work their way out of his system. Then Jiguro set the broken bone, creating a makeshift sling for the guard's right arm.

The merchants and other guards were talking. Balsa heard them, but she didn't understand what they were saying; her attention was still fixed on her opponent. She was out of breath and shaking all over. Her hands wouldn't be still no matter how hard she tried to control them.

Jiguro finished tending the rude guard's injuries and stood up. He looked at Balsa, then placed his hands heavily on her shoulders. Their weight was reassuring; she started to calm down. She looked around the courtyard, remembering that she had to be vigilant about her surroundings.

All of the assembled merchants stared at Balsa and Jiguro, their faces gone pale from shock. "What is this heinous display?!" one of them demanded.

Gozu faced the merchants and bowed. "Forgive me, sirs, for having you witness such a bloody contest. Bringing along an inexperienced guard would be a liability, and if anything happened to the caravan

because of him, it would be my responsibility. I felt that if I did not allow you to see the end of this contest, you might try to bring along the adult guard instead, in place of the child, even though that's clearly not what's best for the safety of the caravan. This child and his father are experienced caravan guards, and I have no problem recommending that we hire them on for this expedition."

The merchants said nothing in response, but the important-looking merchant who had first complained about Balsa gave Gozu a tiny nod.

Sumal, the Kanbalese caravan guard, called out to the merchant as he was turning away. "Lord Tokian, we'll get you safely through this journey, as we have many times before. Please rest assured."

Lord Tokian turned around and looked at Sumal. His gaze was cold. "Ah, Sumal. I thank you for joining us again. My father informed me that this would be the last time."

"The last?" Sumal asked. "I don't understand. I'm not retiring anytime soon."

"I heard that you had a serious illness recently," Sumal said. "Doubtless due to your advanced age." He paused, then added, "You've done this work for us for many years, but it makes more sense to pay the people most suited to this role. I agreed to sign you on because of your history with us, but this is the last time. You're a warrior, and should know your own limitations. Maybe it's time for you to consider retirement, since you haven't." Lord Tokian turned his back to Sumal.

Balsa never forgot the expression on Sumal's face as Lord Tokian walked away from him and started directing the other workers to pack

cargo into the wagons again. It was time for the caravan to depart.

chapter five

Lord Tokian led the caravan. His family owned the Dakam Store in Rota. All told, there were more than forty men associated with the store accompanying the caravan. Their usual tasks were to cook and clean up after the rest of the caravan, and to load and unload cargo. The toshul traveled in the wagons at the head of the caravan, with food, tents and supplies following them. Guards surrounded the caravan on every side. All of the guards on duty were mounted. Gozu gave strict commands so that there would be no obvious openings in the caravan's defenses.

Gozu had been in charge of protecting caravans for more than thirty years, and was getting old himself. He knew a good guard when he saw one, and helped Jiguro get acclimated to his new comrades as quickly as possible. He was fair in his division of duties and always spoke to Lord Tokian with the utmost respect.

The caravan paused to gather firewood in the early evening on the first day of their journey. Gozu called out to Balsa. "Your dad taught you well," he said. "You may be half as big as the rest of us, but I'm willing to assign you to guard shifts. You ride a horse well and can fight better than most. If you do the job well, you'll get a cut of any extra payments we receive, too."

Balsa blushed and thanked Gozu politely. She'd rarely been praised for her riding skills before, and was happy at the compliment. She agreed to take guard shifts, though she didn't expect to make much money in exchange. Maybe she would make enough so that she could do a little shopping for herself. They would be separating from the caravan at the Traders' Market. Balsa wanted to buy a souvenir for Tanda. He loved drawing and picture books, and in Rota, there were picture books with special paper made from flower petals and fragrant grasses. She knew he'd be overjoyed if she brought one back for him. She looked forward to it as she bedded down in a small tent that night.

Wind flapped at the tent canvas. Sometimes she heard men patrolling slowly back and forth through the tall grass. The ground was hard and not exactly comfortable to sleep on, but Balsa's heart felt light and free. The smell of the earth and the grass were all-encompassing, and she felt like a part of it all. When she'd slept at the tavern, surrounded by walls, Balsa often had nightmares that her and Jiguro's pursuers found them and captured them.

Balsa closed her eyes, feeling safer than usual. She had no nightmares.

Moving the cargo safely so that it wouldn't spill or leak out was exceedingly difficult. The caravan's pace slowed to a crawl. By the time they entered the vast, grassy plains typical of northern Rota, it was almost the end of autumn. Most early mornings were misty and cold enough to freeze people through. The cooks and doctors in the caravan

had their hands full, but they were skilled at their work, and no one suffered too much from the late autumn chill. They fried bam in the middle of the day and distributed it. A kind of stew called laru and sweet tea were always boiling and readily available.

The head chef was singled out for particular praise by Gozu. "He knows what he's doing, at any rate. Makes this whole effort worth all the fuss," he said while sipping at his stew. "Lord Tokian kept most of the same group that we usually take on this trip, which shows that he has common sense, at any rate."

Many of the guards in the caravan had been working this route for ten years or more, and knew Lord Tokian well—some of them had known him since he was a small child. Lord Tokian's father knew the men of the caravan better, of course, having worked with them for longer. This was Lord Tokian's first time leading the caravan expedition without his father present.

"One thing does bother me," Sumal said. "His father always ate with us, but he always takes his meals alone, in his tent. Very standoffish."

The other guards near Sumal grinned. "Don't let it bother you. He's always like that," one of the guards said quietly. "He's not like his father. He wants to expand this business considerably. I've heard rumors that he's got his fingers in several pies."

The guard fell silent. Gozu glanced at him. "You're not thinking about gold dust, are you? Everyone knows those are only rumors. Jitan had a hefty supply of it a long time ago, and the merchants that traded in it used it to barter connections with the royal family. But the market for gold dust is more or less locked down now—none of the merchants

trading in it currently would be willing to let an outsider get a cut of their business."

Gozu smiled. "The Dakam Store has a proud tradition, but no one would call it large or famous. It may be that Lord Tokian hopes to blaze a new trail for us by exchanging toshul for gold dust in Jitan, but we won't know that for sure until we get there. Who knows? His plans for the future might make things a bit easier for all of us."

Balsa listened to the adults' conversation. Jitan was the ancient capital of Rota and home to a royal palace. Because of that, the roads surrounding it were protected by Rota's army, and there was little risk that the caravan would be attacked by bandits or thieves there. The caravan's route had been chosen so that they would indeed pass through Jitan on their way to Toluan and the Traders' Market, but trade between these three important cities wasn't easy. This was by design: the economies of all three cities depended so much on trade that they made artificial separations between them and authorized routes that would only pass through one or two cities on any given caravan journey. The fact that this caravan was stopping in all three places meant that they would have to take a dangerous road over a river gorge that wasn't frequently used and was poorly guarded. Jiguro had revealed all of this to Balsa during their travels.

Balsa didn't really understand why there was such a convoluted trade system—the details put her to sleep—but she remembered the gist of it. She listened to the guards talk while sipping sweet tea and eating fried bam, and tried not to think too hard about the dangers ahead.

Suddenly, Sumal chuckled. "If I know Lord Tokian, he'll probably sell off as much toshul as he can in Jitan and offer the gold dust merchants a share of his own profits to get on their good side. Let's pray that he fails. If he doesn't, he'll fire half of us without a second thought, since he'll have both his profit and a much lighter cargo. Don't tell me you all are still planning to follow such a man?"

The guards exchanged chagrined smiles.

A whistle blew: the caravan would depart soon. Guards hastily finished their stew and packed up their tents and gear. The road in front of them now was a familiar one: they knew which places were safest as well as the places where bandits could spring an ambush. The vigilance of the guards relaxed slightly, and they moved at an easy pace. The other guards taught Balsa what to look for along the road as they traveled.

Balsa tried not to follow Jiguro around too much, especially while they were working. He was in the vanguard of the caravan, and she was in the back. She was usually around the other guards during the day, and had many opportunities to speak with Gozu and Sumal. Gozu was exceptionally skilled at bow hunting. When they stopped to hunt for food, Gozu sometimes took Balsa with him and gave her pointers on how to improve her shooting.

Of course, Jiguro had taught Balsa how to use a bow before, but Kanbalese bows and Rotan bows were entirely different in terms of usage and design. Kanbalese bows were designed for the mountains and open fields, whereas Rotan bows were longer and harder to draw, since they were often used as offensive weapons or to hunt game that

was far away under tree cover. Balsa was excited to learn a new skill, especially since it was so useful for survival.

Autumn was the season for hunting. Balsa gathered ripened fruit from trees to eat while walking through the woods, following the tracks of deer and wild boar. Between the meat, fruit, and their stores, meals in autumn were like a feast for the caravan. The sizzling fat of hunted meat bubbled and hissed on the fires. The scent of it always made Balsa's mouth water. Meat that wasn't eaten as soon as it was caught was dried, smoked, or salted. Jerky was a common snack for Balsa and the other guards. Stew with meat in it warmed Balsa all the way to her bones.

The caravan guards who weren't on duty always gathered firewood around sunset. Sometimes people talked or told stories to pass the time, but not everyone did. Balsa kept her eyes fixed on the camp in the middle distance, watching the flames of the cooking fires.

By bad luck, Balsa was finding a lot of green wood that wouldn't burn well. The other guards didn't fare much better. When she brought back her load, Jiguro was standing near the wood pile. He looked at the wood, then started speaking in a low voice.

"White tree, new tree, grow toward the sky.

In our bodies, the impulse for growth resides.

Black tree, old tree, your trunk has grown thick.

It embraces the white wood of the new tree.

Trees, exchange your growth for warmth,

warmth that embraces us, and keeps us alive

so that we, too, may grow. A fire glows

in the heart of old firewood, brighter and brighter

the longer it is kept in store."

Balsa looked up at Jiguro. "Who wrote that poem?" she asked.

Jiguro shrugged, then shifted his gaze to the cooking fires. "It's an ancient poem, from Kanbal. No one knows who wrote it anymore. It's a poem that most old Kanbalese warriors know."

Balsa snorted; she assumed Jiguro was holding out on her, and that he did know who'd written the poem.

Jiguro simply smiled, looking down at Balsa like an old tree towering over a sapling.

Balsa, uncharacteristically, sat next to Jiguro at the fire that night. The warmth of the flames banished both the cold and the darkness. She could feel them all around her, but they couldn't touch her. She was content.

Sumal caught a nasty cold and started suffering from chest pain. Gozu shifted him to the rear guard of the caravan so that he would be able to keep pace easier. Sumal taught Balsa how to recognize signs of an injured or sick beast in the wild, since other animals would often try to corner and attack such a beast. Balsa thought that Sumal himself was a little like a wounded beast, at the moment.

The journey was a long one, so the caravan sometimes took rest days for the sake of both people and horses. It became Sumal's habit to go hunting on rest days, and Balsa would usually tag along with him. They were standing in a grove in the early morning, frost turning bare tree branches white, when Sumal said, "Don't focus on a single spot. You need a complete view of your surroundings before you can concentrate on a specific trail. Once you learn the general patterns that emerge in nature, you'll understand instinctively where animals are likely to be. Try taking in as much as you can at once, to start."

Balsa did as directed, her breath steaming in front of her face. She didn't see anything of interest. She wondered if Sumal had brought her to this place as a trick or something, to test out what she already knew. But there were no tracks here; of that, she was certain.

Sumal placed his hand on Balsa's shoulder, then pointed at the roots of a tree to her right. "Look there. There's something on the roots; do you see it?"

Now that he'd pointed it out, it was obvious that a portion of the roots was shiny. Balsa squinted, then gasped.

"That's right," Sumal said. "The fur of a karam." A karam was a small woodland creature, similar in size to a squirrel. "They shed their autumn coats before growing their winter fur. When they brush against the trees, some of their autumn fur comes loose and gets left behind. If you can see that, you'll be able to tell where the karam headed next. Imagine that karam brushing against this tree. Which way were its feet pointed? Where did it go from here?"

Balsa pointed. "Probably that grass over there." There was a patch of grass that was slightly tamped down. She hadn't noticed it at all before,

but now that she knew the karam had been here, it was so easy to see. She found it strange—and a bit mysterious—that she could see so many things with her eyes, yet still not notice them. She headed into the grass and discovered the paw prints of a karam pressed faintly into the muddy ground.

"You found it," Sumal said. He sounded satisfied. "Do you want to try getting closer? You don't have to."

Balsa decided to follow the tracks. Sumal stayed a little behind her, observing. They were passing by another tree when Balsa stopped and pointed at its roots. "Isn't that more karam fur?" she asked.

"Ah," Sumal said, crouching down slightly. "Looks like this one's a mother, since it's larger. The one we've been following is smaller and younger. I think she was leading her young along this path somewhere recently."

Balsa noticed fur higher up on the tree roots as well as more fur closer to the ground. Balsa thought about a mama karam leading her babies from tree to tree and smiled. Sumal smiled, too, and his smile lacked all trace of bitterness or sadness. "Karam are delicious, but killing a mother and children in cold blood goes against my sense of ethics. We can try to get closer, but I'm not of a mind to hunt them."

Sumal patted Balsa fondly on the head, then peered into the forest grove. "Karam babies stay close to their mother. They cling to her until they can walk on their own. And karam mothers are very protective—they won't let their children out of their sight."

"Do wild animals have families, like people do?" Balsa asked, looking down at the karam tracks. "I haven't seen male animals help

with raising babies, though."

Sumal laughed. "Well, I suppose that's nature at work. The women do the hard part while the men have all the fun. Only women can have babies, so they can't avoid ‘em once they're born, like men can. It's an unfair system—though not all animals are the same." He started walking again.

Sumal and Balsa walked through the trees. The temperature dropped; the ground and the branches twining above their heads were dusted with a fine layer of frost. There was a line of small caves eroded in rock along the path. As they were walking past the caves, Sumal whispered, "You know, I had a son, too. He looked a lot like me when I was young, though he wasn't as strong. I was away on jobs so much when he was little that my wife ran off with another man. She took my son, too, and I didn't see him again until I passed through a town and found him working in a shop. She left him there, you see. I took him out to the woods like this when he was a kid, and taught him about the animals. I miss those days."

Balsa didn't know what she was supposed to say to that. She didn't like talking about her own past, so hearing Sumal talk about his made her a little uncomfortable.

"He died when he was eight," Sumal said quietly. "It seemed like a cold, at first. But he never got better."

Balsa's eyes widened. Sumal wasn't looking at her. His eyes were on the karam tracks. "I shouldn't have told you that. I'm sorry. I'm a father, but my son died without his mother or his father near him, left in the care of strangers. It's a common enough story, but it wasn't one I

needed to tell." He apologized again, then started coughing. Balsa stopped walking and turned toward him.

Sumal's coughing finally quieted. Balsa moved behind him. He faced her before they started walking again, and a shaft of pale autumn sunlight fell over his face. His white hair and beard seemed to glow in contrast to the sere brown leaves and trunks of the trees. "I understand why your father wants you to following his footsteps," he said. "Even if we're attacked by bandits, or die of some disease, at least there's a good chance that you'll die together."

Sumal's smile was more like a grimace. "That's a very Kanbalese idea, always being ready to die. You never know what's gonna get you. But doing this work prepares you to deal with many dangers, on your own and in groups. It increases the chance that you'll live longer." He sighed. "I would understand better if you were his son. I can't even imagine bringing up a daughter like you, the way he has. I couldn't bear the idea that you might die because I failed to protect you."

Balsa's face clouded over.

"Don't look at me like that," Sumal said. "People are entitled to their own opinions." Sumal narrowed his eyes, looking straight ahead. "Killing people with a spear is distasteful work. No matter how justified you think you are in killing someone, death is permanent. You can't take back killing a person, or an animal. If you were my daughter, I'd never let you do it. But you have to be able to kill to guard a caravan." He smiled again, but he seemed sad.

"You probably don't think of yourself as a girl. You'll follow your dad through thick and thin, and grow up just like him. I'm certain you can do that. But getting used to killing—to the sight of blood all over your

hands—is a miserable existence. You may reach the point where the people you kill are nothing but numbers to you. The more you kill, the more you get paid, so it all becomes—well, transactional. Impersonal. True, you'll save some people, too, but they won't thank you. It's why they pay you; that's all."

Sumal's tone was cynical. The emptiness in his eyes was like a bottomless pit. "And if you survive, all you can expect in the end is to be dismissed and discarded as worthless. Younger caravan guards are growing up all the time. You might be able to live on savings for a while, assuming you have any, but after that…" He shrugged. "Most of the men I've known who make it this long starve to death." He looked up at the sky through the tree branches, squinting at the sun.

"That's why I wouldn't bring a daughter into such a life," he said. "I'd find a place to leave you, with good people, so that you could put down roots and make a better life for yourself. If my son had lived…" he sighed again.

Do you want to live in Torogai's hut?

Balsa remembered Jiguro's words and stopped still.

If you'd rather not keep living like this with me, I'm sure Torogai would take you in. She might complain that it was a bother at first, but she wouldn't mean it.

Remembering Jiguro staring up at the ceiling, saying that to her in his calm way, made a chill go up her spine. She felt like a cold evening wind was blowing through her, strong enough to knock her down.

"I want you to really listen to what I say next," Sumal said. "If you ever think that you aren't cut out for this life, quit. Do something else—

anything else. Find a good man, settle down and have kids. You'll have your own family, and children to mourn you—and you won't starve to death, or die on the end of an enemy's sword. Don't become a wanderer like me, who lives only for money—and only because I need it to stay alive."

Once again, Balsa was at a complete loss for what to say. Sumal stared at her for a moment, then chuckled. They kept walking, tracking the karam through the woods.

Balsa walked behind Sumal, thinking about what he'd said. He thinks he knows about my life, but he doesn't know anything at all. She bit her lip. Sumal's story saddened her, but she didn't think his fears for the future were well-founded. Jiguro had always protected her, and she could protect herself now, too. If there came a time when she couldn't protect herself anymore, then she wouldn't survive. Jiguro had taught her that much.

And there was a mountain's worth of information that Sumal didn't know about Balsa and Jiguro—their past as well as their current life. They didn't only have to fear death from bandits, or from starvation. Enemies dogged their heels, and they would never shake them as long as King Rogsam of Kanbal was alive.

Leaves fell around Balsa's feet as she thought about her past, and her father—her real one. He'd smiled a lot, and talked a lot: much more than Jiguro in both instances. She could never think about him for very long before being overwhelmed with a piercing grief that made her feel like she was being stabbed through the heart. She didn't know how long she kept walking, feeling that way: it seemed like time was standing still.

Jiguro and her father used to eat dinner and drink together most evenings. Jiguro was content to listen to her father's stories and news of the day. He'd smiled a lot more then, too. Balsa remembered sitting in her father's lap so that she could reach the table. She remembered him bouncing her on his knee.

But her father had been murdered, and the peace and happiness her family had enjoyed was shattered. Her breath caught. She was no longer grief-stricken, but enraged.

If only he hadn't been killed...

If she would have grown up in Kanbal with her father, she probably would have turned out a lot like him. He was so kind, and laughed and smiled a lot, and never killed anyone with a spear. She would be a girl who laughed and smiled and talked a lot, who was nice to everybody. But that didn't seem like a person she could be, now.

Someday...

Balsa looked down at her hands, which were nicked and gouged from gathering firewood and training with the spear.

I'll kill King Rogsam. I'll chop his head off and use it as a kickball, and I won't regret it at all, not ever.

She often thought about killing Rogsam, but she didn't know the ins and outs of assassination. She'd dreamed up good ways to kill him for years, but none of them seemed likely to be successful. Still, the desire to kill Rogsam burned constantly within herself as a raw core of rage.

The path of Balsa's life had taken a violent turn, full of broken bones and bruises and slashing blades. Balsa feared both pain and injury, but her over-arching instinct was to transcend her physical limitations

using brute strength alone. She didn't have to be afraid, if only she was strong enough.

The anger inside her coiled in her gut like a poisonous snake, ready to strike out with every movement of her spear and every blow of her fists. If she became strong enough—even if it was only a little at a time—she'd be able to kill Rogsam, someday. And if she couldn't do that, she would die. Her life up until that point would be a failure. If she failed, she would only demonstrate—to herself and everyone else—that she'd been too weak.

Sumal couldn't possibly know or understand her motivations for wanting to be strong.

Balsa took a deep breath. Birds were singing somewhere close by. She stood still, shifting her gaze to Sumal, who was still walking ahead of her.

Sumal...was crying.

Balsa's hear skipped a beat. Sumal made no sound, and kept walking as if there was nothing wrong, but there were definitely tears streaming down his cheeks.

Balsa looked down at the ground. She didn't want Sumal to know that she'd seen him crying.

chapter six

The steppes of northern Rota had a kind of wild, rough beauty that Balsa preferred to the sloping grasslands and forests farther south. Northern Rota's terrain was also more rugged and dangerous. Many people had lost their lives crossing over deep gorges or fording rivers with fast currents. The people in the caravan were familiar with the route, but accidents could still happen. Everyone was a little on edge.

The caravan moved through tall grass, climbing uphill until they reached a wide riverbed. The river flowed down from the north; Balsa could see it winding through a wooded area some distance away. The sunlight glistened on its surface, making the river look like a lazy, shiny-scaled snake. Balsa traced it with her eyes all the way to the horizon.

The grass was relatively short here, so bandits couldn't use it to hide. The river had no bridge, so the caravan had to look for the shallowest place to cross. Fortunately, the river itself only reached Balsa's knees at its deepest point. There were smooth, polished stones at the bottom of the riverbed. The water whispered over them, flowing fast. When the first horses tried to cross, the animals paused, made skittish by the strength of the current.

Balsa was close to the river. From behind her, she heard Sumal shout, "Oi! Stick close to the baggage. It's not safe to ford the stream on foot."

He approached Balsa, staying between her and the horses that were about to cross. "It may not look it, but this is the safest place to cross, since the water's so shallow. That doesn't mean it's safe. If a horse misses its footing here, it could be dragged downstream from the current. So watch your step."

Balsa looked up at him in surprise. The river didn't look all that dangerous to her, but Sumal's face was pale with dread.

Most of the caravan made it across the river without incident. Lord Tokian rode up to Sumal and Balsa and hailed Sumal. Balsa thought that he sounded a little scared. He was making a brave show of it, but his hands shook where he gripped the horse's reins.

"You're not thinking about what happened that one time, are you?" Sumal asked.

"No, why would I be? I fell in more than ten years ago! And yes, you saved my life then, but I haven't had a problem since, and would appreciate it if you didn't make unwarranted assumptions," Lord Tokian snapped. "My father paid you plenty extra for rescuing me. He even paid your son's funeral expenses—he got a better grave than the son of a caravan guard deserves. Am I wrong? My father and I have thanked you enough, and there's no need for us to thank you more at this point. You're always griping; it's a nuisance."

Sumal went a shade paler. A feverish light shone in his eyes, bright, but concentrated into the pinpricks of his pupils. He gripped his spear

and might have been about to strike out with it when Gozu rode up behind Lord Tokian. Gozu put his hand up, commanding restraint.

"Lord Tokian, you've said more than enough," Gozu said. "This is Balsa's first time crossing the river. I'm sure he simply wanted her to be aware of the danger, and giving an example of a past incident is a good way to do that. You shouldn't malign your guards in front of the others; it's terrible for morale. Going on like that might make a guard pull his weapon on you."

Tokian glared at Gozu. "Don't presume to threaten your employer, Gozu. If you don't do well by me and the other merchants who hire you, you'll never find work again. If a man draws his sword against me, so be it; I'll order him killed on the spot. If I die, all your lives might as well be over—you'll have no livelihood. No one would take on a guard who killed the person he was supposed to protect.

Tokian returned his attention to Sumal. "If you wish to continue working in this caravan, watch your mouth, Sumal. I can harm your reputation as easily as I can end your life, and I won't hesitate to do it if you don't fall in line." He pulled up on his horse's reins and started crossing the river. He didn't look back—and he didn't fall in.

Balsa glanced sidelong at Sumal. His face had no expression. He stared into space, looking at nothing in particular. He pulled on the reins of his own horse a little, encouraging the beast into movement. Balsa and Gozu watched him ride off, giving him some distance before they followed.

"It happened...a long time ago," Gozu said softly. "Lord Tokian was fourteen or fifteen. He was riding across when the horse lost its footing, and he was thrown into the current. Sumal saved him before

he could drown or be washed away." His mouth twitched. "It's an embarrassing memory for Lord Tokian, as I'm sure you can imagine. Sumal was the most experienced caravan guard they had with them at the time, and the most indispensable. He certainly proved his worth that day."

Gozu's eyes followed Lord Tokian. "After that, there was always tension between him and the other caravan guards, especially Sumal. He doesn't like interacting with us; it irritates him." He narrowed his eyes. "Much of what Lord Tokian said was true. He fell off his horse so fast that I didn't believe anyone could save him. When Sumal did, he was made head of the caravan guards by Lord Tokian's father, and given a large sum of money as a reward. In addition, Lord Tokian's father paid to bury Sumal's son. But at the time, Sumal wasn't considering money at all. No amount of money can wipe away the death of a child."

Balsa listened silently. Gozu offered her a bitter smile. "That's one of the hardest things about being a caravan guard. We have more opportunities to kill people for money than we have to save them, but in the end, it comes down to the same thing—being paid in the coin of other people's lives. I think about it, sometimes... I've saved many lives over the years, but it's almost always been transactional. I often wished people would thank me more with their words and their attitude, rather than simply with money. But you have to think of it from the other side. We're paid to save the people who employ us; that is the job we've been hired to do. If you're dissatisfied with that, you can't do the job properly."

Balsa stared at Gozu.

You're mistaken. An echo of Jiguro's words were on her own tongue, but she didn't say them. But she did believe that Gozu was wrong. It was only natural to be dissatisfied with disrespect and a bad attitude, but that feeling didn't have to affect a caravan guard's work performance. Jiguro had saved her life without being paid any money at all, so saving people's lives wasn't necessarily a simple transaction. There were subtleties in the situation that Gozu either hadn't mentioned or hadn't considered.

Gozu rode ahead of Balsa and brought his horse alongside Gozu's. They started talking in fits and starts. Suddenly, Sumal twisted in his saddle to look at Balsa. "Hey!" Sumal called out. "Ride closer!"

Balsa approached. When she was close enough to touch, Sumal rested his hand on her head, then got a solid grip on her hair. He didn't pull. "You're a small guard now, but you're getting more experienced by the day," he said. "Have you thought about what I said before? Have you thought about anything else you'd like to do instead?" His voice was quiet, pitched so that only Balsa could hear him easily. He laughed, then tugged playfully at her ears. She scowled at him.

When Balsa said nothing, Sumal pointed at a few barrels of toshul on a wagon just ahead of them. "There's a difference between this cargo wagon and that one," he said, indicating another wagon. "Do you see it?"

Balsa rubbed her red ears while observing the wagons Sumal had indicated. The two wagons looked similar at first glance, but Balsa was able to see at least one obvious difference. "That wagon's a little taller," she said.

Sumal nodded. "The wheels are attached to a higher axle, making it easier for that wagon to ride above any obstacles. But it also wobbles more, since it's farther from the ground. Most of the time, it's best to move liquor and spirits in wagons that don't bounce or wobble much, but toshul is different. The herb and the grain alcohol separate easily, like oil and water, unless they're constantly being mixed together. The rougher the journey, the better the toshul will be—within reason, anyway. You can usually tell good toshul by the number of grain bees trying to feed off it."

The grain bees had followed the caravan for most of their journey. They were always swarming around the cargo barrels. As she looked over the cargo, she noticed that one barrel on the left-hand side of a wagon didn't have any grain bees near it at all. The other barrels around it attracted hundreds of insects, and yet...

"That barrel..."

"Yes," Sumal said. "All the good stuff's sunk to the bottom, and the movement of the cart isn't enough to mix it up again, so the bees just aren't interested. It really stands out, don't you think?"

The sky darkened overhead, and a short time later, it started to rain. Men rushed to cover the wagons with oiled paper and tarps to prevent the cargo from getting wet. Balsa watched them, thinking about the barrel the bees were neglecting.

chapter seven

The caravan took a road leading away from Jitan and stopped at a town close to the Traders' Market. Lord Tokian rented a warehouse in town and stored his precious barrels of cargo. The warehouse was locked, and he possessed the only key. "It should be safe enough in there for one night," Lord Tokian said.

Lord Tokian passed Gozu the key, along with a heap of copper coins. "The extra I'm giving you now is insurance. We can't afford any mistakes here."

Gozu accepted the key and the money with a reassuring nod. "We won't, Lord Tokian."

The men who usually took care of the horses and the camp's cooking and chores were given a night off. Lord Tokian gave them a bit of money to spend in town. Gozu distributed the copper coins he'd received equally among the other caravan guards.

"You can drink tonight if you like, lads," Gozu said. "But don't get in trouble."

The men laughed as they pocketed their money.

"We're going to go into town to dispel any bad luck the caravan's got," Gozu said to Jiguro. "Would you care to join us?"

Jiguro nodded. "I've got friends in town, but you've shared a bit extra with all of us, so I'll accompany you."

Gozu smiled. "I'm glad the area is familiar. There are always bandits along the road this time of year, and the fighting can get fierce. Most of the men in the caravan have traveled this route before, but just because we know it, that doesn't mean it's safe. We've all got to keep our eyes open."

Gozu glanced over at Balsa, then placed five copper coins in her palm. "You're off-duty tonight," he said. "They'll be bringing a feast into the camp, so eat up and get some sleep. The road gets a lot more dangerous after we leave this town."

Balsa clutched at the coins in her palm and looked up at Jiguro. He nodded.

The caravan guards dispersed to have dinner and go drinking in town. Sumal hung back to discuss something with the caravan drivers and the men who packed the wagons. Jiguro and Gozu walked together along the road. Lord Tokian hailed them, and they stopped.

"I've heard that Sumal has debts," Lord Tokian said. "Is that true?"

"I don't know," Gozu said. "Who did you hear that from?"

"It's a rumor among the packhorse drivers," Lord Tokian said. "I heard that he borrowed money from one of them. I just gave everyone a bit of money, so it seems like the debt was more than the extra money would cover."

"I doubt that," Gozu said. "I've borrowed a little money here and there before, but if we make it through this job safely, we'll all have more than enough to pay back even a very large debt. I wouldn't worry

too much about it, Lord Tokian. Sumal knows better than to use the money we need to pray for good luck on frivolous things."

Tokian frowned back at Sumal, who didn't seem to notice him. "I'll trust your judgment," he said after a pause. He started walking back toward the camp.

Gozu offered Jiguro a pained smile. "Sumal is a good person, but he does seem to get into more than his fair share of trouble." He made a hand gesture as if he were about to roll dice. "Sumal has no obvious vices, and no family. He doesn't drink. From the outside, his life appears quite dull.

"But it's true that he's been borrowing money. He asked me for some, but I refused. I thought he probably needed it to buy medicine. He's been sick since last year, but he's much paler and thinner this year. I worry about him, but I don't want bad rumors getting around. You've seen how Lord Tokian is."

Balsa was following Jiguro and Gozu, listening to their conversation. She felt like she should say or do something, but she wasn't sure what. The other caravan guards kept talking about doing something to ward off bad luck, but Balsa had no idea what they were talking about. It seemed to be caravan guard jargon.

She would learn later that Gozu and the other guards sought out the local bandits in taverns and used part of their extra wages to bribe them so that they wouldn't attack the caravan. This was a good deal for both the caravan and the bandits. No one needed to risk their lives unnecessarily. It was harder to find food at this time of year, so it was a lean time for bandits. Not every caravan did what Gozu and the other

guards did, but enough of them did that this road had been gradually getting safer to travel during the winter months.

There were many benefits to employing the same guards year after year: they all knew the favorite haunts of the bandit leaders in this town, and many of them were on friendly terms. The guards' time in town was mostly spent meeting with the bandit leaders, paying for their drinks, and negotiating a price to let the caravan pass in peace.

Balsa did know that Jiguro often spent nights in town at taverns talking to people, but she'd never accompanied him on these excursions before.

I want to see what they're doing. Why is it secret?

She'd gotten used to living in a Rotan tavern, since they'd spent so many months there. She understood what the waiters and waitresses did and how the taverns made money. She also knew that the kitchens were hotbeds of gossip. The people there would know before anyone else if there were any other Kanbalese warriors in town, or any strangers to the area. They were valuable sources of information about potential enemies from Kanbal.

Balsa flipped one of her copper coins on her thumb, caught it, then dashed after Jiguro.

Balsa didn't want Jiguro to know she was watching him. She kept as far back as she could in the growing darkness so that he wouldn't see her easily when he turned around. Jiguro and Gozu entered a tavern

through the back door. She watched them with a growing sense of excitement.

Most Rotan taverns had two back doors: one for the people who delivered food and other goods, and one for the waiters and waitresses that was close to a well or a river so that they could do their washing and clean dishes. The latter door was usually connected to the kitchen to make it easier to pass soiled clothes, dishes, or very young children who'd gotten into something they shouldn't out the door.

A few children were washing dishes outside. Balsa approached them casually and smiled. She asked to help, and they let her. She was waiting to catch sight of a waitress so that she could ask a few questions. She found a likely-looking woman who stopped to check on the children and got down on her knees, saying that she and her father were being pursued by bad men and that she was looking for any information that she could. She brought a copper coin out of her sleeve.

The woman smiled kindly at her. She said that she hadn't heard any rumors of bad men nearby, but that she would ask her friends and come back. Balsa watched her go. She'd seen waitresses collecting information before. They made it look effortless, asking questions as they cleaned tables or put up chairs. Talking was a good way to pass the time, since their jobs involved a lot of routine tasks. Balsa would have been very bored as a waitress if she hadn't been allowed to talk to people.

A man came out of the tavern to smoke a pipe of kazal, a sweet herb. Cooking smells wafted outside from the kitchen. The air belching forth from inside was hot and stale. Balsa took a peek inside and noticed all the smoke dancing on the ceiling. The tavern didn't seem to have

enough chimneys. She noticed firewood burning in hearths along one wall. She didn't envy the waitresses here the task of clearing out the chimneys of the cooking fires one bit.

She remembered a waitress telling her that there was no good way to clean a fireplace, so most of the time, they weren't cleaned. Taverns were filthy, anyway: people smoke and drank there every day, and cleaning the tables and floors was overwhelming enough. All the smoke inside used to make Balsa choke before she got used to it.

Remembering her old friends at the Rotan tavern made Balsa recall that terrible burning pain in her throat, too. She might never see them again. She wanted to cry, but she blamed that on the sense memory of the pain in her throat and not on homesickness.

"Oi! Is that massal?" a man called out. Massal was pulled pork mixed with eggs; the entire dish was deep-fried before serving. "If it is, bring some of that our way!"

The man was talking to Balsa, and his voice startled her back into awareness. She went over to the man's table, though that was a bit difficult. The tavern had been expanded frequently over the years and there were support beams and pillars in odd places to shore up the roof. Balsa signaled for a waitress to bring out massal for the table, then started looking for Jiguro.

That, too, was difficult. The pillars and scaffolding obstructed her vision, so that she couldn't see the entire tavern at once. Eventually, she found the table where Jiguro and Gozu were sitting. She crouched down, out of sight, and crept closer.

Jiguro and Gozu sat in the very center of the tavern, behind one of the largest support beams. The table was a large one, and Jiguro and Gozu weren't the only men sitting at it, though they were the only men Balsa recognized. They were leaning across the table, discussing something very seriously in hushed voices.

Balsa put her back against the large support beam and tried her best to hear what they were saying. She picked up on their tone without much trouble, but she could only hear a word here and there: not enough to determine what the conversation was about. For whatever reason, Jiguro was being extremely cautious.

One of the men sitting close to Jiguro nodded. "Yes, that's fine," he said at a normal volume.

What's fine? Keep talking! I want to know what you're doing!

Balsa didn't like the look of the man who'd spoken. Jiguro passed him money under the table. From this, Balsa guessed that Jiguro and Gozu were offering bribes, and that this man must be the leader of some bandit faction or other. But she couldn't see how much money Jiguro had paid the man, and that irked her.

Even when I spy on him I don't find out anything…

The evil-looking man raised his hand. "Bring us some tagu!" Tagu was honeyed liquor. "The best you've got!"

By bad luck, there were no waiters or waitresses near the table. Balsa stayed behind the pillar, not moving a muscle. Jiguro looked around for a server and locked eyes with her. His expression made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

"You there, girl," Jiguro said. "We'd like tagu, too. Make it quick."

Balsa nodded shallowly. "Right away, sirs!" She ran toward the tavern's kitchen.

Gozu recognized her voice and frowned a little, but she was gone before he or Jiguro could pull her aside and ask her anything. Balsa found a waitress and told her that the table in the middle wanted a round of expensive tagu. Then she went outside and knelt down, fingers curling in the dirt, waiting for Jiguro and Gozu to come out.

The man that Jiguro and Gozu were negotiating with came out first, accompanied by an entourage. They seemed to be in high spirits. Some mounted up and others walked down the street, scattering lightly like leaves. Balsa heard Gozu's voice coming from inside the tavern and sat very still.

Gozu came out of the tavern through the front door. He caught sight of Balsa and stared, though she couldn't quite tell if he was angry or simply surprised. "You defied my orders," he said. "That makes you unfit to be a caravan guard. Return the money I gave you before. You don't deserve it."

"Yes, sir," Balsa said softly. She hung her head.

Gozu smiled sadly. "I'll leave the rest to you," he said to Jiguro. "I'm going back to camp to get some sleep. I think I drank a little too much."

Gozu said that, but Balsa thought that he was perfectly steady on his feet as he walked away. Jiguro waited for him to get something of a head start, then followed him. Balsa stuck to his side, not saying anything. She was waiting for her punishment. She would apologize as much as she had to, but she didn't think any amount of apologies would be sufficient.

Light glimmered faintly in the town's windows, illuminating their way. The lights of the tavern grew more and more distant until Balsa couldn't see them anymore.

"Which of those men do you think was the leader?" Jiguro asked.

Balsa looked up at Jiguro, surprised by the question. "Wasn't it the one you were talking to? He looked mean."

Jiguro shook his head. "No. That was the leader's lieutenant. The leader is an unassuming middle-aged man. He didn't say a word while we were negotiating."

Balsa blinked. She didn't remember seeing a man like that, though she must have if he was sitting at the table.

"You would have figured it out if you'd watched the lieutenant's eyes," Jiguro said. "Before any important decision, he glanced toward the actual leader for approval."

Balsa looked down. She'd been so focused on hearing the conversation that she hadn't even noticed anyone's body language. She was relieved that she was simply getting a lecture, and that Gozu and Jiguro didn't seem angry. Jiguro didn't try to prevent Balsa taking more guard shifts, and Gozu allowed her to take shifts after she paid back the five copper coins that he'd given her. She could still be a real caravan guard someday, as long as she didn't make too many mistakes.

Jiguro and Balsa walked along the road under the stars. Jiguro pointed up. "Do you know the name of that star?" he asked.

Balsa squinted at the stars, but she couldn't tell what Jiguro was pointing at. "Which one?"

"The red star near the Great Bird's beak, right there."

The autumn sky wasn't clear: wisps of cloud drifted across it. Balsa had no trouble identifying the Great Bird—it was a constellation that always appeared clearly in this season. She remembered seeing it for the first time in Kanbal, when she was very young. She searched along the constellation's edges and identified the red star that Jiguro was pointing at.

"I don't know that one," Balsa said.

Jiguro didn't say anything at first. He hmmed, then said, "That's a star called the Fruit of Illness. The beak gets closer to it during the autumn. Karuna was always happy when he saw that—it looked to him like a bird trying to spit out a bitter berry."

Jiguro rarely said her father's name. He never talked about him much. Balsa's eyes fixed on Jiguro, waiting for him to say more.

Jiguro smiled a little at her. "It's called the Fruit of Illness because people tend to get colds and the flu starting in autumn. He made the most money then. Before he worked in the royal palace, he treated colds to supplement his income. He was always happy to see more patients."

Jiguro snapped his mouth shut. He stayed quiet as Balsa walked beside him back to the caravan's camp. It was so silent that it seemed like the world had frozen still around them.

chapter eight

The next day proved highly instructive for Balsa—not because it was a typical day for the caravan guards, but because it was extremely unlucky. One of the wagons broke an axle before departure, and all the barrels loaded on it rolled off. The drivers panicked, rushing to secure the cargo and replace the axle before more damage could be done.

The caravan got a late start. They didn't reach the Takau River Valley until past noon, and everyone knew they were far behind schedule for the day. The river valley was narrow enough for the trees on either side of the path to wind their branches together in an arching pattern. There was an old legend that Rota's gods had carved out this valley. Balsa felt like she was being watched by someone as she passed through, though she suspected that it was only birds' eyes that were following her.

The road had started wide and easy from town, but now, the caravan had to stop frequently to ford streams or make sharp turns on the narrow path. It was dangerous to carry their cargo here; one false step could send a wagon tumbling into the gorge below.

At around sunset, the caravan reached a sandy place where footing was particularly poor. The caravan crawled along the northwestern slope of the cliff, following a path that frequently twisted and turned. This would be a terrible place to be attacked by bandits.

Gozu knew this. When it became clear that the caravan would have to leave very late that morning, he informed Lord Tokian of the risks and requested to wait an additional day before setting out. But Lord Tokian refused. He was eager to get to the Traders' Market and unwilling to waste any more time.

Gozu rode up to Lord Tokian with the setting sun shining into his eyes and explained to him that they should stop before going much further if they wanted to minimize at least some of the risks of being in a place like this, but Lord Tokian seemed angry at the insinuation that they'd be attacked here—or that the caravan might not be able to handle such an attack.

"You bribed the local bandits back in town, correct?" Lord Tokian asked. "If so, we have nothing to fear."

The caravan stopped for the night a short time later. There was no attack during the night. When it was time for the caravan to leave again, Jiguro came close to Balsa on his horse. Balsa was also mounted, peering into the pre-dawn darkness, alert for threats.

It was unusual for Jiguro to approach her so early in the day—or at all, really. "I think we'll see blood spilled today—lives given and taken. Be careful," he said quietly. "The man who leads this caravan has lost sight of what truly needs protecting. If we're attacked here, people will die."

Jiguro looked down at Balsa with a hard light in his eyes. Balsa didn't know what to say. Jiguro had never warned her like this before.

"Warriors should always be watchful for the spear that will come to take their lives," Jiguro said. "Defend yourself, always, but especially in

times like this, when you know for certain that the danger is coming. If we're attacked, I'll rush to the front of the caravan and cut my way through to Lord Tokian to protect him. That's my role. Your only job here is to defend yourself." He made a fist and settled it over Balsa's heart. "Use everything you know to keep yourself safe."

Balsa pressed her lips tightly together so that they wouldn't tremble. She nodded.

Jiguro's eyes felt like arrows that were trained on her. "If the time comes, don't hesitate. Kill the man in front of you before he can kill you. You might not have time to escape from them all."

Balsa nodded again.

Jiguro placed a hand on her head. She couldn't see his expression. He rode off, spear in hand, toward the front of the caravan.

The caravan traveled through the Takau River Valley all day until the evening. There were gaps in the trees and the brush lining the path: perfect hiding places for archers. The sun was in the caravan's eyes again. Balsa blinked out after-images of spots, trying to determine if the moving shadows she saw belonged to the caravan, startled animals, or enemies lying in wait.

Rocks littered the path. Balsa heard the horses' hooves echoing off the stones as they picked their way over the uneven ground. A river was below them, flowing fast, but she was used to the sound and able to block it out. She heard something else…

There: a slithering, yet violent sound like a length of silk ripping in two, followed by a blood-curdling scream. The caravan guards around Balsa held their breaths for a moment that seemed to stretch, then sprang into action, trying to reach Lord Tokian at the head of the caravan.

Arrows rained down on them from the high cliff to the left of the path.

"Get down!" the caravan guards shouted to one another. Everyone ducked their heads and took cover behind the wagons. More arrows whizzed into the wagons, sticking in the wagon frames…and the cargo barrels.

The river was to the left, which was the same direction the arrows were coming from. There was no way for the caravan to seek shelter from the archers. Gozu pressed the caravan to move faster, down the path and away from the cliffs. He ordered the caravan guards and the workers to keep using the wagons as a shield.

The packhorse drivers ducked down, but not all of them were fast enough to hide. The next volley of arrows reached the caravan. There were more screams as men collapsed with arrows poking out of their thighs and chests.

Gozu ordered the more seasoned caravan guards to inch around the wagons and fire on the archers before returning quickly to cover. Some of the merchants were also good with bows, and managed to shoot down a few of their attackers. Men cried out all around. Balsa heard them, along with the sounds of falling stones—and falling men.

"They're attacking from the front!" Jiguro yelled.

"And behind!" Sumal shouted. "We're surrounded!"

Jiguro's and Sumal's voices echoed off the cliffs, along with the shouts of their attackers. Gozu was near the front of the caravan, trying to estimate the number of bandits that were attacking. "Open a path," Gozu commanded Jiguro. "I'll lead the wagons through it!"

Jiguro received Gozu's orders and was off like a shot, moving swiftly on horseback. The path was steep, the footing was unstable, and it was growing dark, but neither Jiguro nor the horse he rode showed any sign of difficulty. Jiguro brandished his spear over his head in a wide arc, cutting down any bandits that came close enough to threaten the horse. Two bandits tried to chase down Jiguro on their own horses, but they went too close to the edge of the gorge and fell down into it, along with their mounts.

All Balsa could do was watch. There were no bandits near her. She didn't know what to do.

Gozu was close. She saw him waving his sword, shouting commands to the drivers and caravan workers to get behind the wagons and stay with the caravan. "Run! Run!"

The wagons were moving. Gozu ran out front with the other caravan guards behind, circling the wagons to protect them. Gozu decided to use the final cargo wagon as bait for the bandits and commanded the other caravan guards to abandon it. The packhorse drivers and workers who packed the wagons mounted up on spare horses. The entire caravan was making good time now as they sprinted away from danger.

Up until that time, everyone followed Gozu's orders and the retreat was going smoothly. But then, something went very wrong. Balsa didn't

see what had happened, but the front of the line scattered outward, causing wagons and guards to be separated and making them easy targets for the bandits.

Balsa turned around. Sumal gestured for her to keep riding forward. "Keep going! I'll find the cause of this!" He turned his horse and rode off the path into a thicket. Balsa lost sight of him as his horse leaped into the cover of the trees.

The attack took everyone by surprise, so at first, no one realized that there were relatively few bandits assailing them. Jiguro's charge terrified the bandits, and they soon turned tail and fled. Their numbers were so small that Jiguro wondered why they'd bothered wasting arrows to attack the caravan from behind. The bandits didn't have enough front-line fighters to be effective against such a large contingent of guards, and they didn't have enough ranged fighters to pick them all off.

The caravan kept running. Balsa fell behind until she was at the very back of the line. The bandit archers were still firing on them, getting closer. Balsa prepared to leave the road and hide in the trees to make herself a less obvious target.

It was freezing cold in the shade at night. A strong wind blew through the branches and stuck her clothes to her skin. The mountain slopes in front of her were red with the reflected light of sunset, but there was no light around her or under her, only black-and-purple shadows. Her horse spun, searching for somewhere to go. Balsa was a little motion-sick from the sudden shift, though she remained on her horse.

She didn't need to worry about the bandits now. She had no cargo and carried nothing of great value. All she had to do was keep up with the caravan. She pointed her horse parallel to the path and encouraged it into a gallop. The main problem was that Balsa didn't know where the caravan's next stop was. If she knew that, she could take whatever route she wanted. Because she wasn't sure, she would either have to catch up quickly, or guess. She really didn't want to guess.

Balsa shivered, only partially because of the cold. She'd never been to this part of the mountains before. The horse was content to follow her lead, and she soon became lost in the woods at the foot of a nearby mountain. She stopped and opened her ears. She could just make out the sounds of the fleeing caravan and re-oriented herself.

"Ah, that way!"

Sumal had run behind the caravan during the attack. She should be able to catch up to him. The sounds of the caravan got clearer as she drew closer. She was also near the river gorge, which amplified the sounds of horses galloping and the rolling cargo wagons.

Balsa still saw no sign of Sumal or the others. She paused in place, looking up at the sky through the tree branches overhead, straining her ears to hear. She chased the sound of a rolling cart and was a bit surprised when she heard it suddenly stop. Why would it stop here? She didn't see a reason why it would.

She heard voices. Balsa halted her horse and dismounted, creeping closer on foot. She saw a person's shadow lengthening in the twilight and pressed her back to a tree so that she wouldn't be discovered. She couldn't hear or see very well, so she tied her horse's reins to a tree and went through a cleft in a large stone. It was good cover, but she had to

watch where she stepped: the cleft, like the ravine to her left, would make any sound she made louder.

A scream shattered the surrounding stillness. Balsa stopped still, listening hard. The scream was long and drawn-out, like someone was dying in agony. At first, Balsa thought that Sumal or someone must be fighting the bandits, but that scream was the only one she heard. There were no other sounds of fighting that she could discern.

Balsa swallowed heavily, gripped her spear, and moved in the direction of the scream. The river gorge was close, creating a gap in the trees. Balsa looked up at a patch of clear sky. There was a wagon here, and a few dead packhorse drivers and workers. It was silent and still all around. The light of sunset cast most of what she could see in shadow.

Balsa turned in a circle and identified Sumal standing a little distance away from her. Another man stood in front of Sumal as if he were trying to protect him. Balsa remembered the man talking to Sumal a lot during their journey.

Sumal removed the lid on one of the barrels of toshul and stuck his hand inside. Balsa was too far away to see the expression on his face, but the man next to him let out a cheer and clapped his hands. Sumal passed a heavy-looking bag into the man's hands.

Then, Sumal grabbed his spear and faced the man. On instinct, Balsa closed her eyes. She didn't see the man die, but she heard him scream and fall to the ground.

When Balsa opened her eyes and looked at Sumal, she felt like she was looking at an entirely different person from the one she knew. His

face and hair were spattered with blood. He didn't seem human, but like some kind of monster.

A chill went through Balsa's entire body. If Sumal found her here, he would kill her.

"There's a horse here," a man called out from a short distance away. Balsa didn't recognize his voice.

Suddenly, Balsa heard a lot more hoofbeats coming up from the river gorge. *Is it the bandits?* She pressed her dry lips together to keep them from trembling. Her pulse was racing and her clothes were soaked through with cold sweat. Even the palm that grasped her spear was sweaty. Sumal and the man who had died were in front of her, and the people on horseback were behind her. She had nowhere to run.

Balsa wiped her hands on her clothes so that she could hold her weapon better, then emerged from cover to face Sumal.

Sumal appeared genuinely shocked to see her. He didn't move or call out to her. He recovered from his astonishment and frowned as he started coughing.

The coughing fit gradually turned into a laugh. Balsa felt like he was mocking her.

"What's all this, then?" he asked between peals of laughter. He stepped away from the cargo barrel and approached Balsa.

Balsa started shaking all over. Her body felt like it wasn't her own. Jiguro was at the head of the caravan, far out of reach. She sensed the bandits surrounding her on all sides, pouring out of the river valley, climbing up from the gorge. She knew that she would die here.

"I'll kill this one," Sumal called out as the bandits closed in. "Don't touch her!"

"Didn't you promise us a third of the cut?!" one of the bandits shouted. "This ain't a third! Give this kid to us to even things out. That one'll sell well in Sangal, I bet."

Sumal cast the stone scabbard of his spear on the ground. "You idiots! If you let this one live, we'll have the others on our tail forever!" he spat.

"Sorry, kid," Sumal said. "Looks like this is it, for you."

Balsa gritted her teeth. She held her spear in front of her, ready for Sumal's attack.

Sumal drew closer to her. He had much more experience than her, and he was taller. She was at a significant disadvantage here. She froze and didn't move.

Balsa wasn't scared, exactly, but when she looked at Sumal's face, she couldn't bring herself to move. She understood that if she didn't move, Sumal would kill her, and yet…

Sumal laughed. Balsa thought he was crying, too, but it was hard to tell. Without preamble or pause, Sumal drove his spearpoint into Balsa's chest.

Balsa felt herself move out of the way of the strike before it could reach her. She hadn't planned to move. Her body had simply reacted.

Sumal closed the space between them rapidly, not giving her any time to think. Balsa crouched down and lifted her spear up, blocking Sumal's spear with a strident clang. Sumal took a step back and aimed his next strike at Balsa's left side.

Pain bloomed along her abdomen. Her hands felt heavy where she gripped her weapon. She was frozen again, unable to move. She knew that human flesh and animal flesh were both soft and that only the bones were solid, but she'd never been cut open before, and was feeling an awareness of her own softness and fragility.

She was soft on the inside, and so was Sumal. She lunged forward before the pain set in, grunting, and Sumal was so surprised that he didn't block her strike. Her spear point passed through his chest, near his heart. Sumal grimaced, showing all his teeth. He gripped Balsa's spear and pulled it out of his own chest.

Balsa felt blood splatter on her face and shoulders. Sumal wrapped his hands around her neck and used his last strength to strangle the life out of her. His blood fell on her ears and eyes. She couldn't breathe. Her eyes felt like they were about to burst.

Balsa pawed frantically at her waist for her Rotan short sword. Her hands were shaking, making the weapon hard to grip, but the instant she drew it, she plunged her weapon into Sumal's chest again.

The hands choking her went slack. She collapsed to the ground face-first and gasping. She curled into a ball like a wounded animal.

She felt more than saw Sumal stand up again. He was coughing, and the cough was so familiar: how often had she heard it while traveling with the caravan? Blood from his spear dripped on the ground near her face.

Balsa had to get up. She couldn't stay down, but when she tried to rise, her body wouldn't obey her.

Something cut through the air. The next moment, Sumal collapsed on top of her, gurgling blood. More poured from his nose. Balsa heard more fighting around her and huddled under Sumal, using him as a shield.

After a while, the fighting stopped. Balsa pushed Sumal's dead body off of her and tried to get up. She could now, but her side hurt so badly that she wasn't sure how far she could walk. She passed out in the space between two thoughts.

Jiguro knelt down next to Balsa and started treating Balsa's wounds. Balsa would never know how much his hands were trembling as he treated her. He looked down at her. She was drenched in blood. Her face was covered in it, and Jiguro hadn't even heard her utter a cry.

When Balsa came to much later, she was still seeing red. Red was all that she could see. She remembered the sensation of her spear cutting through Sumal's chest and threw up. Finally, she screamed, and she didn't stop screaming for a long time.

Jiguro pulled Balsa to him and held her, letting her scream and cry and be horrified. She had a high fever from her wound, but her experience today would take longer to heal. No one forgot their first kill. No one.

The rest of the bandits scattered and ran. When Tokian figured out that part of the cargo and several caravan guards were missing, he sent out search

parties. That was the only reason Balsa was still alive. Jiguro was searching for the cargo when he'd found her.

The men Sumal had killed were set to be married in the spring. Someone would need to inform their families and brides-to-be. They had betrayed the caravan along with Sumal, but the other caravan guards begged for Lord Tokian to be lenient. He sent their bodies back to their families.

Sumal had slain his companions to acquire enough gold dust to procure a medicine to cure his illness. Lord Tokian didn't send his body back to his family, but he allowed the caravan to bury him in the woods where he died. He'd given his life in service to that caravan and Lord Tokian's family, but he'd never really belonged among them. He was a wanderer, traveling here and there like a river winding through the countryside. He was buried high on a hill where there was no water, and his body remains there to this day, fixed in place only in death.

cold kindness

The sky was almost clear of clouds, but it was snowing, just light fluffy flakes that looked like cotton fibers blowing in the wind. Tanda's mother was washing her chilblained hands at the well when Tanda rushed up to her, carrying a pot with a lid.

"Mom, can I bring this to the Lord of Winter?"

Tanda's mother lifted the lid off the pot. It was full of bones from birds and fish that had already been boiled for broth, though there was a little meat on them still.

Tanda's mother smiled. "You don't need to ask to take garbage out, Tanda. You can take them to the Lord of Winter if you want."

Tanda started running, using care so that he wouldn't spill the contents of the pot. He'd only run a little ways when his mother called out, "You can make an offering to the Lord of Winter, but you can't go up the mountain! It's going to snow even more today!"

"Okay, mom!" Tanda said that, but internally, he was already making his apologies. He was going up the mountain, but he didn't want to worry her.

The Lord of Winter wasn't a person, of course. Taking scraps to the Lord of Winter meant that Tanda was going to share the contents of the pot with the animals in the forest and on the mountain. It was the end of winter, so it was very difficult for animals to find food. Tanda always liked to share, when he could.

"It's a winter feast for you all!" Tanda said, lifting the lid off the pot and setting it down. "Help yourselves!"

Some animals crept forward, though most were wary. Most of the time, offerings to the Lord of Winter were given by adults from the

village, and adults were known to be hunters in the summer and fall. Seeing a child offering them a pot full of food was a rare sight for the creatures of the forest.

Tanda loved feeding the animals. He set the pot down, and was already looking forward to coming back and seeing a completely clean pot tomorrow morning. The last time that had happened, he'd picked the pot up with a smile and said, "Looks like you liked it! I'll bring more later!"

That time, he'd seen a winter fox and her cubs gathered near the pot, huddling for warmth. The fox still had a bone in her mouth. Tanda was glad that she'd been able to feed her cubs with what he'd left.

No one went far from the village to offer food to the Lord of Winter. Going up the mountain in winter was dangerous, even for adults. But Tanda was determined to try. He'd set aside extra food from dinner and breakfast, hoping it would be enough to tide him over until he reached grandma Torogai's hut.

Tanda's hands were red from the cold. His breath steamed in front of his face. The mountain path was slippery, with a lot of hills and sudden turns.

Tanda hadn't visited Torogai for a while, but the last time he had, he remembered having a wonderful dream. Torogai seemed to think that the dream was a very good thing, which was a relief. His parents and siblings never understood his dreams.

After coming home from Torogai's, Tanda spent his winter days climbing up the mountain path to the temple that protected the village, bringing enough firewood, winter potatoes and dried fruit to keep him

fed for the day. He preferred being there than staying at home all day. Overall, Tanda preferred being alone to being with people. He often went out into the woods to gather firewood for his family. He wasn't scared of the woods, and he never got bored, either.

At sunset, the mountain paths were usually white with new snow. Tanda never saw any footprints aside from his own.

I guess they haven't come back yet. He was a little disappointed in the evenings. *I should go home.*

He couldn't keep waiting forever. He was getting restless. That was why he'd set aside food for himself and asked his mother to let him make offerings to the Lord of Winter.

Tanda passed by the village's temple. The firepit outside it was lined with stones and blackened in the center from frequent use. It was still snowing, but the firepit wasn't covered in it yet, and the snow seemed not to touch the temple at all.

The old men and women who tended the temple kept it well-stocked with firewood over the winter. Sometimes, other villagers came there to burn garbage or sit and talk by the fire.

Tanda almost never used any of the temple's firewood. He preferred to bring his own.

Tanda crouched down in front of the firepit and used a flint stone to spark the kindling to life. His hands were freezing cold. He'd never make it all the way up the mountain if he didn't warm up first. He buried his potatoes in the ashes near the edge and waited for them to cook. He roasted some stale bread over the fire to make it softer. He'd

packed a bit of sweet sauce to dip it in. The smells from the fire made his mouth water; he couldn't wait to eat.

It was past noon. The light, fluffy snowfall turned heavy all at once, putting out the fire and causing it to belch smoke into the darkening sky. Tanda looked longingly up the mountain and saw something moving in the distance.

The snow was falling thicker now, making it harder to see. Still, Tanda was sure that he was looking at people. There were two of them, moving briskly down the mountain path.

His heart pounded. They were coming this way. All he had to do was wait. The snow was so thick now that their figures drifted in and out of sight like figures in a dream. Tanda saw their karru—Rotan-style winter coats—flapping in the cold wind.

Tanda took shelter under the eaves of the temple's roof. The people were still too far off for him to recognize them for certain, but he was sure of who they were.

A dull gray light burst through the clouds. The snowfall softened again, making it possible to see. The people were close. He dashed away from the temple wall, steps light like he was skipping, and went to greet them.

This is the end of *The Wanderer*.

There are two other side-stories in the *Guardian of the Spirit* series:

Those Who Walk the Flame Road

and

Where the Wind Takes Us.

afterword

Story Notes on “The Gambler”

For my whole life, I've written nothing but novels. I never really thought of trying my hand at a short story. I get so caught up in the worlds that I create that I wind up digging deeply into things, so that I can understand how the people in them live and work. I also enjoy interweaving a character's story with that of the world, and of other characters, like threads in a tapestry. Maybe it's inevitable that my stories end up so long.

Publishers have approached me with the idea, saying that they'd like to read a short story by me, but I always told them that writing one was darned near impossible for me. I didn't so much reject their idea as run away from it.

But then, one day, I planted the seed of a story—and it was a short one. That surprised me as much as anyone else. It came to me in a moment of pure inspiration. It would be a new short story set in the *Guardian of the Spirit* world!

I'd rejected the idea of a short story for so long that my publishers convinced me to write an essay about the series instead. The essay's due date was fast approaching, but I hadn't written it. I was far more

interested in the new story. I was running out of time to write that, too. Just when I thought I would have to make a few regrettable calls, the image of a Rotan tavern appeared inside my mind.

There was no one in the tavern. It was just past noon. I tried looking around and caught sight of an old woman sitting at a table by herself, playing a game with dice. And then, Balsa was there, standing in the corner, watching the woman's precise hands movements with rapt attention.

I still remember the moment when that story came to me very clearly. There's a pain associated with it that's difficult to describe. I wasn't sure what kind of story I'd planted when I first started writing the tale of Lahura the gambler. It took shape during the spare moments I had from field work and teaching. All told, I think it took me three days to write it. I spent a few additional days on edits, and then it was ready to submit.

The other two stories in this collection followed in rapid succession. “Floating Rice Husks” came first, followed by “The Gambler.” I felt like I was being fenced in my them. I, who was not a writer of short stories, suddenly had written three.

I wasn't excited by these stories. I didn't really want to write them, at first. It's like that whenever I get a new story idea: it's work to create it, and it's hard, and I feel like I'm constantly getting knocked down and forcing myself up again. I had so many things to do, and at the time it felt like I didn't have time for all these new stories.

But I do know why I accepted the challenge of writing them. The first reason is that I've always been interested in the earlier history of *Guardian of the Spirit's* world. I wanted to see more of Balsa, Tanda and

Jiguro. There were so many things I'd written for the characters in the main series that got cut or was never added, but I knew it all: everything about them. They felt alive to me.

In 2010, the *Beast Slayer* series came to a close—with another collection of short stories, no less!—and I didn't yet feel the need to start working on a long story. I still don't. I don't know why.

There's one other thing I should mention about “The Gambler” and “The Wanderer,” which are working cooperatively in a thematic way. All the stories are, though “Floating Rice Husks” is a bit more arguable from a thematic standpoint. There are people in the world without homes, who leave their families behind, who wander the world alone—that's why this collection is called *The Wanderer.* I wanted to interrogate what being a wanderer actually meant to the people who'd lived that life. When I read over the stories now, their loneliness and resilience still haunt me long after I close the book.

The stories in this collection and the short stories written for *Beast Player* weren't written for a child audience. It's possible that a thirteen-year-old won't be able to understand all of the inner workings going on beneath the surface. But a child who reads these now will understand them, on some level, and they will grow up, like Balsa does, and understand even more. I'm glad that books and stories are like that. People can be like that, too, if they keep their minds and hearts open.

Uehashi Nahoko

January 17, 2011

Abiko